TUFTS CUMMINGS SCHOOL OF VETERINARY MEDICINE

Your Dog

The Newsletter for Caring Dog Owners

BIG STEAK DINNER

Ah, the holidays. 'Tis the season to relax with friends and family, to share good cheer, to reflect on life's blessings. And, for some, it's also the season to rush a vomiting dog to the emergency clinic.

Gravy, turkey skin, cookies, creams - all that rich holiday fare may make human bellies shake like a bowl full of jelly, but it can kill dogs by triggering acute pancreatitis. The life-threatening condition is a severe inflammation of the pancreas. The glandular organ, nestled beneath the stomach and the small intestines, aids digestion and regulates blood sugar by pumping out enzymes and insulin. The condition develops when the enzymes responsible for fat digestion are released prematurely and start to autodigest, or digest the cells of the pancreas.

"Acute pancreatitis can be very serious. It in fact can be fatal, resulting in fluid buildup in the abdomen and thorax, the development of acute kidney failure, and disseminated intravascular coagulation, an inflammation that triggers clotting factors and uses them up to the point where spontaneous bleeding occurs," said Mary Labato, DVM, clinical associate professor at the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

Although there are many suspected triggers for an attack, including certain medications, pesticides and trauma, pancreatitis that occurs suddenly is most commonly associated with dietary indiscretion - a raid on the garbage can or a big steak dinner, said Dr. Labato.

Veterinarians say they see many more cases of pancreatitis around Thanksgiving and the December holidays, brought on by high-fat table scraps. Even owners who are diligent about protecting their pets from other holiday hazards, such as tree tinsel, chocolate Santas and turkey bones, may be unaware of the dangers a lipid overload can pose to their pets. One very sick mixed breed drove this point home to Bonnie Beaver, DVM, professor at the College of Veterinary Medicine at Texas A&M University and immediate past president of the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Her patient had been on a fishing trip with his owners when he started vomiting violently. Dr. Beaver asked if he had eaten anything that may have upset his stomach. At first the owners said no. Then almost as an afterthought, they remembered a dietary indiscretion earlier in the day.

"Oh yeah, they said. I forgot to tell you he ate a pound of bacon. Could that make a difference?" recalled Dr. Beaver. The dog recovered but only after a lengthy and expensive hospital stay. A pound of bacon doesnít have to be the culprit. Even a small amount of fat can cause pancreatitis in an animal prone to it.

Unfortunately, thereís no way to predict if an individual dog has such a predisposition. There is a lot of variation in fat tolerance from one dog to another. Obese dogs appear to face the highest risk, said Dr. Labato. Middle-aged and older females also have a greater tendency to develop the condition.

Among breeds, miniature Schnauzers are known to have a higher risk, but scientists are not sure why. Researchers have been looking for the gene, but have not yet found it. A few other breeds, including miniature Poodles, Cocker Spaniels and some terriers also appear to be prone to it.

Symptoms of the condition are non-specific and can be mistaken for a host of other gastrointestinal disorders. Vomiting is the major sign, but some dogs vomit often for all kinds of reasons. It can be hard to say if the problem is an upset stomach or pancreatitis, which means a trip to the veterinarian is essential.

As a general rule, if a dog vomits several times in a 12-hour period, pancreatitis should be suspected. A single, severe episode of vomiting will warrant medical attention if the owner knows a dog ate a fatty food. Other symptoms include weakness, abdominal pain and dehydration.

Diagnosing the condition can be tricky. *"It can be very difficult to distinguish pancreatitis from other gastrointestinal disorders. Both can cause very severe and refractory [uncontrollable] vomiting and an extremely painful abdomen," said Dr. Labato. "Pancreatitis is often diagnosed by excluding other causes and seeing evidence of inflammation in the pancreas."*

Veterinarians use imaging techniques and blood tests of pancreatic enzymes to make a diagnosis, said Dr. Labato. "Abdominal ultrasound is perhaps the best way that we have here for identifying pancreatitis." Testing pancreatitic enzymes are helpful, but many arenít specific or sensitive enough for a firm diagnosis.

Treatment is mostly supportive, resting the pancreas until the inflammation subsides. *"When the animal is vomiting frequently and severely, there should be nothing by mouth for 24 to 48 hours until the vomiting comes under control,"* said Dr. Labato. Then it's important to provide nutritional support through a feeding tube and intravenous fluids. The dog may also need medication for nausea and pain. Severe cases may require plasma or whole blood transfusions.

In rare cases, a single bout of the disease may so badly damage the pancreas the dog may become diabetic. Most of the time, patients will recover and have no long-term consequences.

Nevertheless, *"it can be expensive and require a lot of hospitalization and good quality patient care,"* Dr. Beaver said. "Prevention is much better than trying to cure it.