

GASTROINTESTINAL FOREIGN BODY OBSTRUCTIONS IN DOGS AND CATS

Intestinal obstructions or blockages in pets are a life-threatening emergency and can result when materials other than foods, commonly bones, toys, string and rocks, are ingested. While smaller foreign bodies may pass through the gastrointestinal system without becoming stuck or causing undue damage, larger objects may become lodged in the intestines or stomach and can have life-threatening consequences. Dogs and cats of any age can develop foreign body obstructions but younger animals under 2 years of age are more frequently seen due to their naturally curious natures. Objects can cause blockages of the oesophagus, stomach, small intestine and/or large intestine.

The early signs of a foreign body obstruction include inappetence, depression, vomiting, excessive salivation, constipation and other abnormalities of defaecation including straining to go to the toilet, the presence of blood in faeces, reduced volume of faeces and even diarrhoea. Prompt veterinary intervention to correct electrolyte abnormalities caused by vomiting, fluid replacement to correct dehydration and antibiotic therapy in the case of infection is frequently required before correction of the obstruction. Palpation of the animal's abdomen or throat may sometimes reveal the presence of either the foreign body itself, gas build-up in front of the obstruction with distension of the intestines and pain in the region of the obstruction.

Radiographs (x-rays) are used to identify the site of the obstruction and are especially helpful if the foreign body contains bone, metal or rock which show up characteristically on x-ray. However, some foreign bodies made up of organic material such as corn cobs, string and hair balls may be the same density as soft tissue on x-rays and can blend in easily with the normal structures in the pet's abdomen. In cases such as this, contrast radiography involving the addition of barium (a dye-like material) can be extremely helpful to outline the obstruction and check patency of the intestines.

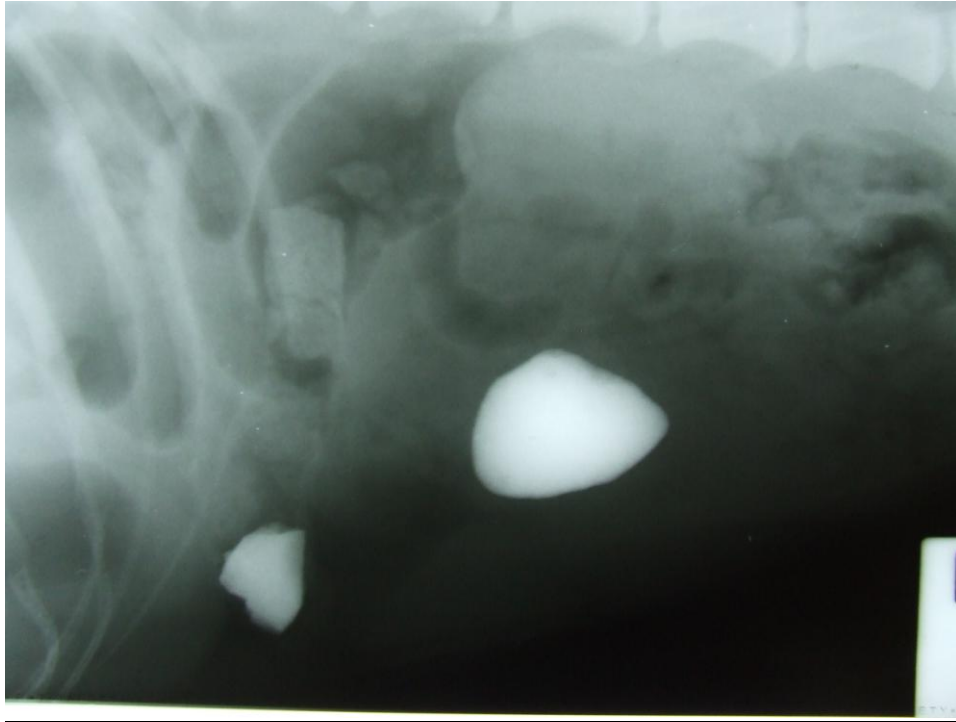


Image: An x-ray of a dog's abdomen. The white spots are rocks

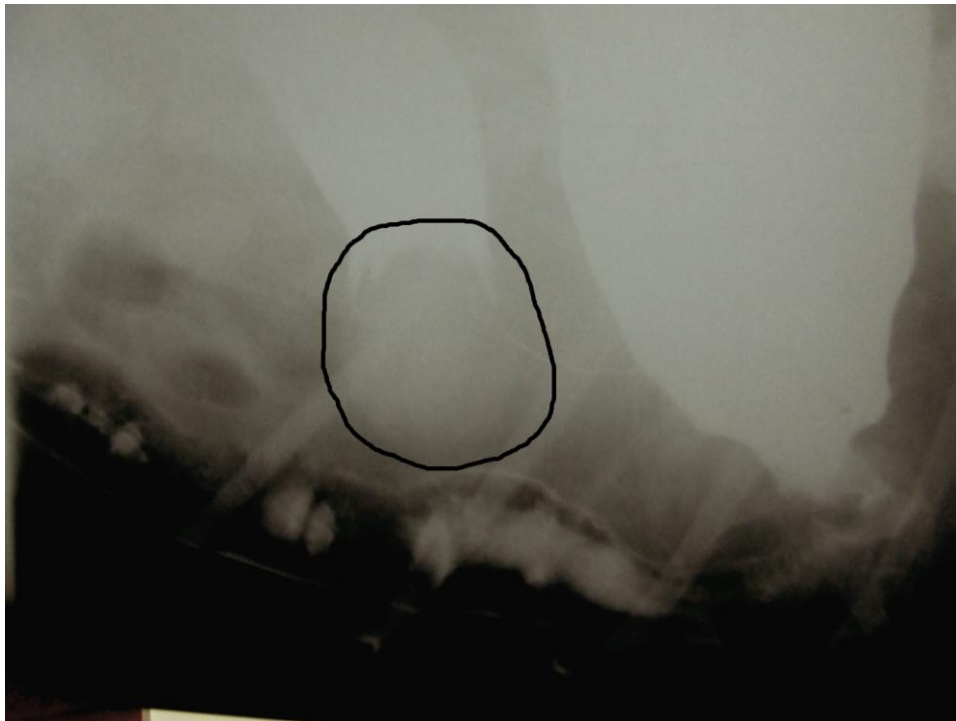


Image: An x-ray of a dog's abdomen. This dog was given barium to highlight the obstruction (circled).

Relieving the obstruction commonly involves surgical exploration of the pet's abdomen to remove the foreign body and examine the entire gastrointestinal tract for further damage. In cases of chronic obstruction or the presence of a large or sharp foreign body, necrosis and laceration of the intestines/stomach around the foreign body can be a complication. This may result in leakage of intestinal contents into the abdomen with ensuing infection (peritonitis) which

puts the pet at great risk of septicaemia and death. In cases where the blood supply to intestines or stomach has been compromised and tissue has become necrotic, removal of portions of the stomach or intestines may be required. Once the foreign body has been successfully removed, the pet is maintained on fluids after the surgery and may require hospitalisation for several days while food and water are re-introduced and bowel movements are monitored.

Preventing access to possible hazards greatly reduces the risk of pets developing this life-threatening condition and toys that could be swallowed or objects such as string should be avoided completely. While it is impossible to monitor your pet around the clock or protect it from every conceivable hazard, prompt intervention in cases of gastrointestinal foreign body obstruction is necessary to give your pet the best chance of survival.