Foreign Bodies in the Esophagus of Dogs

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The esophagus is a small hose-like tube which connects the mouth to the stomach. As it leaves the mouth, it follows a straight path through the neck and chest, passing near the heart through the diaphragm muscle and finally entering the stomach. The esophagus walls are composed of muscles which move in wave-like contractions to push food into the stomach. In the dog, it takes about five seconds for food to move from the mouth to the stomach. Surgery on the esophagus is always difficult because of its location within the chest and its slow rate of healing.

The esophagus, being a tube-like structure, is capable of a certain amount of dilation which allows larger pieces of food to reach the stomach. When a dog ingests an object other than normal food, it typically lodges in the esophagus, near the heart. It is at this point that the esophagus is unable to expand to its widest. Balls, rocks, sticks, triangular bones (pork chop), and even fishhooks are all examples of foreign bodies which may lodge in this area.

What are the symptoms?

If the esophagus is blocked in this manner, food is usually regurgitated within a few minutes after eating. If the blockage is not complete, liquid foods may pass. Chunky food generally cannot reach the stomach.

What are the risks?

A foreign body in the esophagus is always serious. Sharp objects can puncture or wear away the esophageal muscle wall and allow food and bacteria to enter the chest cavity. Severe, life-threatening pneumonia can develop.

What is the management?

Treatment is aimed at removing the object. This may be accomplished by anesthetizing the dog and removing the object via the mouth, or gently pushing it into the stomach. In many instances this is not possible and the chest cavity and esophagus must be surgically opened and the object removed. This type of surgery poses a great risk to the patient, however, the final outcome can be excellent.

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