



## Constipation

Constipation is defined as infrequent, incomplete or difficult defaecation with passage of hard or dry faeces. This would be one of the relatively few conditions that we manage that can be as unpleasant for the treating vet as it is for the patient. Severe constipation is very unpleasant for the affected dog or cat and we always have a great deal of empathy for these patients.

As this condition can be so unpleasant, as well as potentially costly and difficult to manage, it would be very helpful for the pet owner to be able to recognise the early signs of constipation, and more importantly prevent it. If it is recognised early, it may be possible to manage your pet at home.

So how can you tell if your pet is constipated? Generally, what you will see is increased effort and straining to pass faeces, with either no faeces passed or just smallish amounts of dry, hard faeces.

One potential problem is that a condition called colitis can present in a similar way to constipation. Dogs with colitis (inflammation of the large intestine) usually strain with greatly increased effort, and may pass just small amounts of jelly like material, sometimes blood and some soft faeces.

There are many causes of constipation. The most common causes that we see in veterinary practice are dietary and environmental. That's a good thing, because we can manage the diet and environment to help prevent future episodes of constipation.

The common dietary causes of constipation are:

- Cooked bones
- Hair
- Foreign material
- Excessive fibre
- Inadequate water intake

The common environmental factors are

- Lack of exercise
- Obesity
- Difficulty in moving about (eg. Paralysis, severe osteoarthritis).

Without question, most of the dogs we see with severe constipation have ingested a large amount of cooked bones. The advice around this is simple. Please, do not feed your dog cooked bones. Their gut is not equipped to process them. They can splinter, perforate the bowel, and will often cause constipation.

Regular exercise will help prevent obesity and constipation. Likewise, a good quality diet can help prevent constipation. Adding vegetables like pumpkin, broccoli and beans is helpful.

So, what to do next if your pet is constipated? The first decision needs to be "Do I try treating this at home first?" or "Do I take my pet straight to the vet?"

There is no black and white, yes or no answer to this one. The best advice I can give, is that you should seek immediate veterinary attention in the following instances:

- If your pet is vomiting and/or refusing food.
- If your pet is abnormally quiet and lethargic.
- If there is more than a teaspoon of fresh looking blood being passed.
- If it has been more than 3 days since your pet passed a motion.
- If your pet is straining but not passing any faeces.

If your pet is still bright and appears happy and is passing stools that are hard and dry, there are several things you can do at home to try and resolve the problem.

Firstly, encourage adequate water intake. Continue to exercise your pet. You can supplement the diet with psyllium husk – 1 to 3 teaspoons daily depending on the size of your pet. There are over the counter preparations that can be purchased from the chemist that can also be very effective. If you speak with your veterinarian they should be able to tell you whether or not they are appropriate for your pet and the names and dosages of the products.

As we say so often, prevention is better than cure. Avoid those cooked bones. The severe cases we see usually need to be anaesthetised, sometimes several times, so that the faecal material and bones can be manually removed. It is time consuming, costly and unpleasant for the pet. In the most severe cases, perforation of the bowel and death may occur. Yet another good reason to maintain a good exercise and diet regimen for your pet!