

December 2011: The Link Between Stress & Gastroenteritis

Dear Doctor: It seems like whenever we have company at the house lately, our dog will have a few days where he will not eat well, and has vomit and diarrhea. He loves people, so we do not really understand why this happens. Do you have any ideas how to prevent this from happening for him?

Joel in Stevens Point

This question seems especially appropriate around the Holidays, since many pets will have problems similar to your dog. While the symptoms may be similar for many pets, the exact cause may vary from pet to pet. You mention that your dog loves people, so it would seem unlikely that having people visiting would be a direct trigger; however, if you have multiple people visiting, or the visits extend for a few days, the routine of the house may be dramatically altered. As such, your pet may not be on the same exercise and sleep routine, which can negatively affect some pets. This change in routine may be considered a stressor for many pets. Once a pet is stressed, their immune system may not function optimally, allowing for minor problems to become significant. For example, it is possible that a pet has a mild parasitic or bacterial infection in the intestines that would not cause symptoms until the immune system became stressed, allowing the parasite or bacterial infection to become problematic.

Another problem associated with stress is Addison's Disease. A small percentage of pets will have this condition, which is a metabolic disease caused by a lack of appropriate levels of the steroids naturally produced by the body. The steroids are essential for maintaining normal daily function in all pets, and are critical during times of stress. In the early stages of the disease, symptoms are not generally noted unless the pet is forced to deal with some type of stress, which can occur with visitors or with boarding. As the disease progresses, the pet is likely to experience a stress that will cause a life-threatening state of shock. Ideally, the disease is diagnosed and treated before this occurs. Again, the disease is not common, but may be a consideration for pets that have repeated episodes of lethargy, loss of appetite, vomiting or diarrhea.

In addition to the above concerns, visitors may offer food unauthorized treats to your pet, which could definitely cause stomach and intestinal upset. It is not ideal to give pets leftover bones, skin or fatty foods, yet many people will sneak these vary items to the household dog or cat. The problems these foods cause vary from mild stomach irritation and alteration of intestinal bacteria to severe pancreatitis, which is an inflammatory change in the primary digestive gland.

Whatever the cause may be, it is best to contact your veterinarian's office to discuss the symptoms. In some cases, your veterinarian can relay advice over the phone, but in other cases additional testing or examination may be needed. Some pets will be back to normal on their own within a couple of days; however, some pets require dietary or medical management for a few days. For pets with pancreatitis or Addison's, hospitalization may be necessary. Preventing the symptoms depends on the cause. It may be helpful to give an herbal supplement (e.g. Rescue Remedy) and/or a probiotic prior to and during the visits to help the pet to adjust to the stressors, or have your pet stay at a trusted friend's home during that time. It is also important to maintain a strict exercise and dietary routine during the time that your visitors are present. With the help

of your veterinary clinic, you should be able to find the best plan to manage your dog's symptoms. Good luck with your boy!