

## BASIC INFORMATION

### Description

A gastric foreign body is any item, either food or nonfood material, that is present in the stomach and does not pass into the small intestine or is vomited. Some gastric foreign bodies can cause severe vomiting or intestinal obstruction, and others (such as coins or metal toys) can poison the animal.

### Causes

Gastric foreign bodies occur when something is swallowed but cannot leave the stomach. They may include large pieces of bone, an item that the animal was playing with, accumulations of hair (hair balls), and abnormal material eaten (such as dirt, rocks, or kitty litter).

Some animals eat unusual items if they have nausea, such as can occur with gastritis. Some animals eat unusual items as part of a behavioral problem or as the result of a medical condition (such as anemia or Cushing's disease). The consumption of unusual items is called *pica*.

### Clinical Signs

The most common clinical sign of a gastric foreign body is vomiting. Some animals also lose their appetite. If the foreign body is made of zinc, the animal may develop anemia (pale gums, lethargy, and weakness). If the foreign body is made of a heavy metal such as lead, signs of poisoning may occur. (See also the hand-outs on **Zinc Toxicosis** and **Lead Poisoning**.) Often, gastric foreign bodies are found when x-rays are performed on an animal with vomiting problems.

### Diagnostic Tests

If a gastric foreign body is suspected, abdominal x-rays are commonly recommended. Routine laboratory tests and an abdominal ultrasound may also be recommended to rule out other conditions, such as liver, pancreatic, or kidney diseases that can cause vomiting.

A contrast study (gastrogram) of the stomach may be performed if a foreign body is suspected but not found on plain x-rays. In a gastrogram, barium or some other agent is administered orally to help highlight any foreign material. In some cases, foreign bodies are found during examination of the stomach with an endoscope (gastroscope) or during exploratory surgery.

## TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

### Treatment Options

The best treatment for a gastric foreign body is to remove it. Some foreign bodies can be removed with the use of an endoscope, but if the foreign body is large, abdominal surgery may be recommended. Surgical removal of gastric foreign bodies involves a procedure in which the stomach is opened, called a gastrotomy. Patients with gastric foreign bodies made of metals often require additional drug therapy to help bind and remove the metal from the rest of the body. Supportive care for anemia and other signs of toxicity may also be needed. Additional therapies may be started to address any underlying causes of *pica*.

### Follow-up Care

Following a gastrotomy, food and water are often withheld for a period of time to allow the stomach to recover. Water is then initiated and is followed later by a bland diet if no vomiting occurs. The animal is also kept quiet until the sutures are removed, usually at 10-14 days after the surgery. Patients that have had a gastric foreign body removed with an endoscope have no sutures and tend to recover more quickly, with less follow-up care.

### Prognosis

Prognosis for patients with gastric foreign bodies is usually good, assuming that the foreign body is removed with no complications and any underlying contributing disease is successfully treated. If the foreign body is not removed, obstruction of the small intestine may occur and can lead to severe vomiting and life-threatening illness.