

Foreign Body Surgery

- A foreign body surgery is a procedure to remove an object from a pet's digestive tract that will not pass through on its own.
- Diagnosis of a foreign body is usually made by physical examination and radiographs (x-rays).
- This is typically an emergency procedure that must be performed before injury occurs to the esophagus, stomach, or intestines.

What Is a Foreign Body Surgery?

Pets aren't picky eaters. It's common for them to eat objects, such as string, toys, rocks, and articles of clothing. Smaller objects may pass through the digestive tract uneventfully. Objects that don't pass through easily may cause obstructions that can damage or perforate the digestive tract, which can lead to death. A foreign body surgery is an emergency procedure to retrieve an object before it damages the esophagus, stomach, or intestines.

What Types of Objects Are Typically Involved?

Dogs are more likely to eat foreign objects than cats. Common foreign objects found in dogs include bones, rawhides, corn cobs, and fishhooks. Some types of glue are particularly troublesome, because if a dog chews on the glue bottle, the glue expands in the stomach and can be difficult to remove. Of course, large or sharp objects and those containing poisonous substances should be removed as soon as possible.

For cats, eating string (such as dental floss or yarn) is especially dangerous. String can become lodged in the digestive tract and cut through the tender tissue as the continual motion of the intestines attempts to push it along. While most hairballs generally pass through the digestive system, some may become large enough to cause a blockage.

What Are the Signs of a Foreign Body?

The signs may vary depending on the location of the foreign body. If the object is in the esophagus, the

pet may gag, cough, salivate, or gulp as if attempting to swallow. If the object is in the stomach or intestines, the pet most likely will vomit and may be lethargic (tired) and/or have a loss of appetite, vomiting, or diarrhea.

How Is a Foreign Body Diagnosed?

In some cases, the veterinarian may be able to feel the object with his or her hands while gently pressing on the pet's abdomen during a physical examination. Usually, radiographs, or x-rays, are required.

While some objects, such as bones and metal, are obvious on radiographs, others, such as clothing, are not. In these cases, the veterinarian may have the animal swallow barium, which is a liquid that is visible on radiographs. A series of radiographs enables the veterinarian to watch the barium move through the digestive

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tract. The barium may actually surround the object and make it visible, or the barium may stop moving, indicating the possible location of the obstruction.

If an animal shows signs of having eaten a foreign object, but the radiographs are inconclusive, a veterinarian may recommend an exploratory surgery. While this surgical procedure may enable the veterinarian to locate and remove the foreign body, occasionally, no foreign body is found.

How Is the Surgery Performed?

In most cases, animals suspected of having a foreign body undergo an abdominal surgery under general anesthesia. Depending on where the object is, the veterinarian may need to open the stomach and/or the intestines to remove it.

Tests and Procedures

If the foreign body is in the esophagus within the chest, the veterinarian may recommend endoscopy to remove the object. In this procedure, the animal is anesthetized, and a flexible tube with a camera is placed down the animal's esophagus. The camera enables the veterinarian to see the object and manipulate prongs or a basket at the end of the tube to grasp and retrieve it.

The advantage of endoscopy is that it is noninvasive and your pet will require less recovery time. If endoscopy is not available, the veterinarian will need to open your pet's chest.

What Are the Risks and Benefits of the Surgery?

There are always risks associated with anesthesia and surgery. Performing blood tests will provide the

veterinarian with information that will help him or her stabilize the pet before surgery.

A foreign body surgery is an invasive procedure that involves opening the abdomen or chest, as well as making incisions into the digestive tract. In addition to the risk of infection, there is always the possibility that the sutured area of the incision may come apart, requiring the veterinarian to perform another surgery.

Without emergency surgery, however, an obstruction caused by a foreign body can be fatal. Prompt diagnosis and surgical treatment can help eliminate the problem and set your pet on the road to recovery.

The best way to prevent a foreign body surgery is to remove small or chewable objects from the floor and yard. Keep strings and rubber bands in boxes or drawers, and cover wastebaskets to prevent curious pets from eating the contents.