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FELINE MEGACOLON

What is it? Megacolon is the term used to describe a severely enlarged colon that no longer has normal peristalsis (movement) to help move the stool out toward the rectum and anus. This condition can result secondary to a stricture of the colon/rectum preventing normal passage of stool or more often is idiopathic (unknown cause).

What animals are affected? If the colonic obstruction resulting in megacolon is caused by trauma (pelvic fractures) or cancer, it can occur in any animal; however, idiopathic megacolon occurs most commonly in cats—middle aged to older of any breed.

What are the signs? Chronic, recurrent obstipation. Affected cats have significant difficulty with bowel movements, and when they are able to pass some stool, it is typically just small, firm pieces rather than a normal stool. Cats may visit the litter box frequently, strain, cry out, become inappetant and some may start vomiting. Enemas can help, but the problem usually recurs and can necessitate enemas as frequently as every 1 to 2 weeks.

How is it diagnosed? Diagnosis of megacolon is based on history, physical exam (usually a very large, firm, feces filled colon can be felt on abdominal palpation), and radiographs of the abdomen.

How is it treated? Medical management includes periodic enemas, deobstipation (manual removal of feces), laxatives (lactulose works well as it helps bring fluid into the colon), and motility agents (to try to enhance colonic motility). Many people will try feeding high fiber diets, pumpkin...with inconsistent to poor results. Ideally the pet should be fed a highly digestible diet to reduce the amount of stool produced. Surgery for megacolon involves a subtotal colectomy (removing most if not all of the affected, abnormal colon). This method requires a procedure called colonic resection and anastomosis, which means the abnormal part (most of the colon) is removed and the two ends are then anastomosed or sutured back together. If the megacolon is secondary to a stricture or some other physical obstruction, this obstruction must be corrected as well.

What after care is needed? After a subtotal colectomy, the patient will be hospitalized for a day or two for monitoring and supportive care. They are kept on broad spectrum antibiotics and closely monitored for infection. Depending on how much of the colon has to be removed, the patient may initially have diarrhea. This condition should improve over time. The animal must have restricted activity for at least two weeks while the surgical site and the abdominal incision are healing. We recommend feeding a highly digestible diet as noted above.

What is the prognosis? Most cats will do very well after this procedure. There can be complications such as breakdown of the surgical site, which can lead to peritonitis (infection in the abdomen), significant diarrhea, or recurrence of the obstipation; however, most recover well from the procedure and with proper diet can have a normal quality of life.

Can it be prevented? There is no way to prevent idiopathic megacolon. Megacolon, secondary to pelvic fractures, can be prevented by appropriate repair of the fractures.

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