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Dog & Small Animals Vet

Gastric dilatation and volvulus (GDV)

One of the most devastating conditions vets are called on to treat is known as bloat. Also known as gastric torsion or more correctly gastric dilatation and volvulus (GDV), this condition occurs when the stomach twists on itself resulting in the rapid onset of critical illness. Dogs with bloat go from being normal to critically ill in a very short space of time (minutes rather than hours).

It is imperative that affected dogs receive immediate veterinary attention to maximise their chances of survival. This can be achieved by being aware of the usual signs an affected dog shows. There are also some things pet owners can do to reduce the risk that their dog will develop bloat.



Dr Adam Gordon - Maroubra Veterinary Hospital

Adam Gordon graduated from the University of Sydney in 1990. He completed a Masters degree in Veterinary Studies at Murdoch University in 2002. Adam has been in companion animal practice since 1990 and is principal of Maroubra Veterinary Hospital.

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There are a number of factors that may predispose a dog to developing GDV. Certain breeds are particularly prone to GDV. Most affected dogs have a deep and narrow chest (referred to as deep-chested breeds). The most commonly affected breeds are Weimaraners, Great Danes, Irish Setters, Dobermans and Bassett Hounds.

Once the stomach twists on itself, gas cannot escape and accumulates. This results in a multitude of complex problems for the affected dog and the rapid onset of symptoms. The dog will suddenly appear to be very uncomfortable and distressed. They will usually be panting heavily, drooling, weak and very depressed. After a short period the abdomen will be very tense and distended. Retching and gagging is also common. The presence of any of these signs should prompt the dog owner to seek immediate veterinary attention.

When the dog with bloat presents to the vet hospital our attention turns to diagnosis of the problem as well as immediate treatment of the life-threatening complications of this disease. The breed of dog, history and physical examination findings are usually sufficient for the experienced vet to be confident of the diagnosis. An x-ray of the abdomen will be required to distinguish between simple dilatation of the stomach and dilatation with volvulus (the twist).

Immediate treatment involves large volumes of intravenous fluids, intravenous antibiotics and attempts at releasing some of the gas from the stomach. This is done either by passing a tube through the mouth and oesophagus into the stomach (which is often not possible), or by placing large needles through the abdominal wall straight into the stomach.

Once the dog's condition is as stable as possible they are taken to surgery. Surgery is always needed when the stomach is twisted. Surgery involves replacing the stomach to its normal position and fixing it to the abdominal wall in an attempt to prevent it from twisting again.

Whilst that all sounds relatively straightforward, it is often very difficult, time-consuming and risky. It is common for these dogs to develop abnormal heart rhythms, making anaesthesia high-risk. As a result of disruption to the blood supply to the stomach, some dogs have areas of stomach that have died and need to be removed. Some dogs also have problems with the spleen, necessitating its removal.

After surgery has been completed, most dogs will spend at least 3 to 4 days in hospital being closely monitored for potential complications. The statistics that relate to bloat make for quite depressing reading. Mortality rates vary from 15% to as high as 60%. Affected dogs can also suffer recurrence of the condition, though performing additional surgery to fix the stomach to the abdominal wall drastically reduces the rate of recurrence.

So how can you prevent your dog getting bloat? Whilst there is no sure-fire way to guarantee your dog will not get bloat, there are some simple things you can do that are thought to reduce the risk.

Owners of at-risk breeds should adhere to the following recommendations:

- Feed several small meals a day rather than one large meal.
- Avoid feeding immediately before and after exercise.
- Do not feed dogs from an elevated food bowl.
- Do not breed dogs that have had a parent, sibling or offspring with bloat.

Some owners of at-risk breeds may choose to have preventative surgery done on their dogs while they are healthy. Whilst this still does not guarantee the dog will not get bloat, it will reduce the risk. In my opinion it is worth considering in deep-chested dogs that have had a sibling or parent develop bloat.



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Because animals matter



Melissa Catt BVSc – Paddington Cat Hospital

Melissa graduated from the University of Sydney in 1990. She worked in a private small animal practice in Adelaide for two years and then in England for a further two years. Melissa continued in private practice on her return to Sydney before starting Paddington Cat Hospital with her husband, Randolph Baral in 1997. Melissa is interested in all aspects of feline medicine and has a particular liking for soft tissue surgery. Of course, Melissa was nominatively destined for feline medicine.

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Cat Vet

A Story of Lethargy

One of the most common reasons an animal is brought to the vet when it is sick is because "Felix/Felicity is just not him/herself." Upon questioning, this often means that they aren't doing their usual things, like waking the owner up first thing in the morning for breakfast or having their witching hour, during which they go a bit crazy in the late afternoon. They will spend much of their time lying around and not responding to the normal triggers that make up the typical routine. This general lack of enthusiasm is often associated with a lack of appetite, and in the medical record we refer to this combination as inappetance and lethargy.

Unfortunately, although this is such a common presenting complaint, it is not at all specific, and we can see it associated with anything from a mild gastro to end stage kidney disease. If Felix could talk, it might make our job a bit easier (but less challenging!)



I had a case like this a few weeks ago, where Mardy, a nine-year-old male desexed long-haired cat, presented for having had a couple of strange, fit-like episodes and just lying around not doing a lot, including eating. Mardy came from the pound only a couple of years ago and has a fear of being handled by strangers, which increases the challenge. We decided a house call might be the best way to get the most cooperation from Mardy, and would make everything less stressful all round.

The first thing I did was watch Mardy walking around, including down the stairs, to look for any signs of weakness. He was moving around normally and seemed very coordinated, stopping halfway down the stairs to clean a paw. This immediately made arthritis or trauma to bones and soft tissue much less likely. There were no obvious wounds, swellings or discharges, so a fight with another cat was also placed further down my list of possibilities.

On a physical examination (which he tolerated better than usual, a testament to how sick he was feeling), he reacted to having his abdomen (tummy) palpated in a particular area. Otherwise I couldn't feel anything out of the normal and his heart and chest seemed fine. His mouth was good (he'd had dental work only a year ago) and there were no other problems evident.

The next step was to take blood from him to run a number of tests - liver tests, kidney tests, to check his blood sugar levels, check his red and white cell levels and other miscellaneous bits and pieces. The only things that showed up on blood tests were that two of his liver enzymes were mildly increased. This is also fairly non-specific, most likely being associated with something going on in his pancreas or intestine.

At this stage I reviewed all the information that we had gathered so far. Mardy was inappetent and lethargic, had a history of a couple of strange episodes, possibly had a painful area in his abdomen and had mild increase in some enzymes. The episodes that Mardy had had were short periods of not seeming to be aware of his surroundings, plus one time doing a backward somersault and another time lying on his side, panting. It was difficult to tell whether these were actually 'fits' or something else, like episodes of acute pain. At this point I thought the most likely

scenarios were either a disease in his abdomen (like maybe he had swallowed a 'foreign body' which was partially stuck, or he had a mass), or in his brain (for example a brain tumour).

The next logical step was to do tests to look into his abdomen, in the hope we had something we could treat, like pancreatitis, or a foreign body which could be treated with surgery. Mardy had an ultrasound performed on his abdomen, which is a non-invasive way of having a really good look inside. He did need to have his hair shaved and an anaesthetic (there's no way he would have stayed still while we poked his tummy for 40 minutes!) but we got a good look without having to do surgery to see inside. There was a bit of thickening of one part of his intestine, but apart from that nothing else that was abnormal. We didn't think that this could explain the signs he had shown, or why he seemed so sick, so we decided against any further investigations along this path. If we had seen there was a much more significant problem then surgery could have been helpful to get a final diagnosis, and potentially to help treat.

As we had Mardy already anaesthetised and the ultrasound machine was ready, I thought the best next step was to do a heart ultrasound. The reasoning behind this is that even though he had no abnormalities when I listened to his heart, heart disease can make some cats feel sick and can sometimes cause little clots, which could have been the reason for the episodes he had had. Heart disease can be a very challenging problem, particularly in cats, as not all cats with heart disease (even severe disease) show any signs on physical examination.

Well, we certainly found the reason for Mardy being lethargic and having his little turns - he was diagnosed with severe heart disease.

This case shows that even when we have an animal that is very sick, it can be difficult to try to localise the problem. This is especially true when the only signs the cat is showing are lethargy and inappetance.

At last report, Mardy is going well with his medications. He is eating well, is playing in the back garden and has started to wake his owners up at 6 o'clock in the morning for breakfast again!

Bird & Exotics Vet

Losing Feathers. Why?

It is very common for bird lovers to bring in the pet bird with the concern that it's having a major skin or feather problem. Fortunately not all feather problems are a disease issues, with the most common normal feather changes being simply a bird moulting.



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What is moulting?

Moulting is the replacement of old feathers with new feathers. It is a normal process in birds.

When do birds moult?

Moult occurs once to twice a year depending on the bird species. The most common time for a moult is mid-summer, with often a second, smaller moult in early-mid winter. Most normal moults take about 6 weeks to complete. The flight feathers of both wings are lost and replaced in order, with the outer feathers being replaced before the inner flight feathers.

Coming into winter time we are still seeing birds moulting. Most should have finished moulting by late February. But with our unusually hot weather this summer and then the sudden cold snaps it's moved many birds into moulting out of normal time of year. This can be a problem as birds may be losing feathers at a time they need all their feathers to keep warm.

Moulting is common yet often misunderstood by many owners. Often, owners come to us concerned that it's feather picking and want advice as to cause, only to find it's a normal moult. Owners often think constant grooming indicates feather mites. Some spray their bird with mite spray and then again every 2 weeks and find the problem goes away. They assume it had mites, but feather mites rarely make a bird itchy. It was simply moulting and improved after completion.

How to consider whether it is a normal moult?

During a moult, feathers that have fallen out are often found at the bottom of the cage/aviary. The new feathers growing in their place on the body initially appear like waxy pins (pin feathers). Usually they are more noticeable on the head. The bird cleans the off feathers so they open normally. Often, small, waxy pieces are seen around the cage looking like dandruff.

A bird should normally lose feathers in the same area on both sides of the body and wings simultaneously. So both the outer two wing feathers should fall out around the same time. Pet birds rarely lose the ability to fly as they do not lose enough feathers at any one time to stop flight.

Supplements during the moult - are they necessary?

Many breeders and owners, and some veterinarians, recommend that birds need supplements to help during times of moulting. I believe that birds on a balanced diet of pellets, some seed and fresh foods do not need vitamin supplements. However, birds on all-seed diets may need vitamin and mineral supplements.

Problems associated with moulting

Moulting can be stressful for birds. A lot of energy is expended in feather production. Hormonal changes, normal in the moulting process, can affect the immune system such that moulting birds are more susceptible to infections. Often birds that have been carrying a disease for a long time suddenly cannot cope during the moult. This is why it is important to have your pet bird annually health-checked to find any underlying problems before the bird becomes sick during the moult.

Abnormal moulting

Sometimes birds have an abnormal moult and this may be a sign of feather picking or disease. Normal moult should not cause major bald spots as a few feathers at a time are replaced with new growth. Major bald spots are abnormal.



**Dr Alex Rosenwax - BVSC MACVSc (Avian Health)
Bird & Exotics Veterinarian, Green Square.**

Alex graduated from the University of Sydney in 1991. He achieved Membership of the Avian Health Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in 1996. In November 1996 he opened the first and only Sydney all bird and exotic pet practice. The Clinic moved to 1 Hunter St Waterloo in 2003 and sees approximately 80% birds, and 20% fish, reptiles and other exotic pets. Alex is the current president of the Australian Veterinary Association Avian Group.

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Feathers that are discoloured or remain as pin feathers are abnormal and disease process is a likely cause. Common causes of abnormal moults include viral and bacterial infections or liver diseases and nutritional deficiencies.

Many pet birds, especially budgerigars and cockatiels, seem to moult continuously. In many cases it's due to not having enough hours of darkness per night. Normally most Australian birds need up to 11-13 hours of darkness a day.



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