

Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)

What is IBD?

IBD is a disease of the gastrointestinal tract, either the stomach and or small intestine and or the colon. Often the disease is caused by an over-reactive immune system in response to food or bacterial components. Sometimes a bacterial infection will begin the process by altering the normal gut flora, other times a change in diet can upset the balance inside the gut and instigate IBD.

Regardless of the cause, there is a disruption to the normal barrier lining the gastrointestinal tract, which allows exposure of foreign material to the immune system when under normal circumstances these foreign particles are excluded from being exposed. As a result there is a severe inflammatory response causing signs such as vomiting, diarrhoea, anorexia, weight loss, lethargy etc.

Why does it occur?

There are numerous thoughts on what the causes of IBD are but often these are never truly known. IBD will usually start following a change in diet or an episode of gastroenteritis. IBD also occurs in humans, and is similar in some respects to Crohn's disease in humans. There is a possibility that there is a genetic component to it and some breeds are more prone than others.

How is IBD diagnosed?

The process of diagnosing IBD usually involves an ultrasound of the abdomen. This can help exclude other causes of vomiting, diarrhoea etc as it allows visualisation of all the organs inside the abdomen. If there are no specific changes seen on ultrasound, than a general anaesthetic and endoscopic biopsies of the gut lining are required. This can be done by passing the endoscope down through the mouth and into the stomach, or through the rectum and into the colon.

The biopsy is the size of a match head and multiple biopsies are taken from different areas and sent off for a pathologist to examine. The procedure is painless and the animals make a rapid recovery.

It is important to exclude other diseases that cause similar signs to IBD. These are things such as a food intolerance, parasites, bacterial infections or cancer. In some instances, when IBD is very severe, it is difficult to distinguish the biopsy from lymphoma. It is reported that IBD may predispose animals to developing gastrointestinal lymphoma if severe or untreated.

What are the treatments for IBD?

1. Dietary restriction

This is a very important part of the therapy. Usually a special diet is fed, either a commercial one (Hills prescription Z/D) or a home-made one. Often the diet must be fed exclusively in order for it to be successful. Home made diets will consist of kangaroo, duck or rabbit with potatoes. These are proteins which your pet is unlikely to have encountered previously. Hills Z/D is unique

in that all the proteins are broken down into very small components to which the immune system cannot react against.

2. Antibacterial medication

A combination of any of the following may be used; Metronidazole, Tylosin and Enrofloxacin. These can help remove any pathogenic bacteria from the gut lining which may be contributing to the IBD and help modulates the body's immune reaction

3. Immune-suppressive medication

Prednisolone is the first immune-suppressive drug used because it is effective and cheap. If this drug does not work, than another drug called azathioprine is used however it is more expensive and can be toxic to the bone marrow, so requires careful monitoring

What is the long term prognosis for your pet?

If the IBD is not severe than the prognosis is good. After a prolonged course of therapy and diet, some animals may come into remission. Others require lifelong medication and dietary restriction. If the IBD is severe than the prognosis is poor and transformation into cancer is possible.