

Pets Eat the Weirdest Things; Pet Proof Your Home

Pets do not have the most discerning palate and will occasionally eat the most baffling of things. When objects are swallowed that shouldn't be, as a pet guardian you have reason to be concerned. Sometimes these foreign objects can pass through the digestive system without event, but when they cannot pass they may create a potentially fatal blockage requiring expensive lifesaving treatment. A "foreign body" can do significant damage to a pet's intestines and, even with surgery, may cause lifelong issues.



You never know what your pet might swallow. So take precautions to prevent severe injury that might require surgery. This x-ray shows a child's toy ingested by the family dog requiring surgery to remove.

Pet proof your home

Get a "pet's-eye view" of your home. Get on your hands and knees and look at your home from your pet's perspective. You'll be amazed at the things you'll notice that your pet might ingest. Keep small items that can be swallowed picked up and out of reach.

Know your pet's habits. When was the last time you asked yourself "What happened to the other half of that dog toy?" Perhaps your dryer is not really responsible for that lone missing sock? Your home is your pet's playground, and our pets enjoy the thrill of discovering a new chew toy.

The trashcan is a treasure trove for many dogs and cats. Secure your bin in a cabinet or have one with a lid that latches securely. Be aware when throwing away food items as this can entice your pet into the garbage where he may consume something non-digestible. A good rule of thumb is that if a toddler can get into it, so can a pet.

Depending on your pet, laundry (hampers, laundry baskets, even open drawers) can be another culprit. One of my dogs is a notorious sock thief! If your pet plays harmlessly with such things, then you probably have no worries. However if they tend to chew, fabric can be very dangerous to an animal's digestive tract.

Strings and other playthings

Cats enjoy batting a ball, but yarn, strings and even electrical cords can create what is called a "linear" foreign body if ingested. This can be one of the most life-threatening situations. As the long, narrow object moves along

in the digestive tract, the motion can cause the intestines to bunch up. If your cat enjoys playing with ribbons, play together so she is closely supervised.

It's rather gross to think about, but sometimes things ingested *do* pass. You might find the evidence of dietary indiscretion in the litterbox or while scooping the yard. If you notice something like string coming from your pet's backside, it could be very dangerous to pull it out, as this can cause serious damage.

One notable surgery in our veterinary clinic was performed on a cat who enjoyed playing with rubber hair bands. The guardian noticed the kitty was vomiting and was refusing her dinner. In surgery it was revealed that over the years, this feline had swallowed more than 50 rubber bands before these symptoms occurred.

Pet proof your yard

The household trash bin is not the only one that can pose a threat. Outdoor waste bins, compost bins and even wood piles can contain objects of interest to a pet. One of the most interesting objects I've seen on an X-ray was a set of door hinges in the tummy of a very young puppy. Our veterinarians suspect the puppy was allowed to chew on some scrap wood and ingested the hinges at that time.

In the yard you'll also want to check your hoses for those telltale signs that your dog has been chewing. Stow away your lawn and garden chemicals such as fertilizer and weed killers. Many indoor and outdoor plants are toxic. Visit the ASPCA poison control center website for a listing of plants and other harmful items: <http://aspca.org/pet-care/poison-control>

You know your pet best

One of the earliest signs something is wrong is if your pet will not feel well. If your pet is refusing to eat, vomiting, dry heaving or gagging, they may have ingested something problematic. In cases where a full blockage exists, your pet will not be able to keep any food or water down.

If you think your pet has ingested something, it is important to contact your veterinary clinic immediately. If a foreign object is detected, your veterinarian can provide you with a recommendation for care.

Next steps

The veterinarian will likely want to take some radiographs. Some objects like coins or rocks will show up on the film, but others will not. If the doctor cannot be certain of a blockage based on radiographs, they may perform an ultrasound or may give your pet barium. This liquid will "light up" the digestive tract so that any blockages will show more clearly. Even if nothing shows up, your veterinarian may still recommend "exploratory" surgery. Often this is the only way foreign bodies are discovered.

Remember, the sooner your pet receives medical attention, the less damage that can be done to a pet's delicate system, and they will have the best chance for full recovery.

Kat Burns, CVPM is Director of Veterinary Services for the Humane Society of Boulder Valley's shelter medicine program and full-service public veterinary clinic.