# Inflammatory Bowel Disease in Small Animals

# What is Inflammatory Bowel Disease?

Inflammatory Bowel Disease (or IBD) is a chronic inflammation of the gut that occurs frequently in dogs, cats and people. It is believed to be a multifactorial disease, which means that many different factors in different combinations can/ have to come together for the disease to "break out". Partly, this is due to genetic susceptibility (IBD is more common in some dog breeds than others, for example the German Shepherd Dog), and partly to environmental factors, most of which are not well defined. Overall, dogs and cats seem to show an "overreaction" of their immune system in the gut, which normally tolerates the harmless intestinal bacteria (so called microflora or microbiota well). This normal "tolerance" gets lost and the gut becomes permanently inflamed even though there is no "bad" infectious agent present. Treatment is hence tailored towards both reducing the overshooting immune reaction as well as modifying the gut flora (see below).

# How do I know if my dog or cat could suffer from this?

Inflammatory bowel disease is what we call "a diagnosis of exclusion". That means that from the symptoms and clinical signs alone, we cannot diagnose the disease. This is also due to the fact that many other disease can result in very similar clinical signs in dogs and cats. There is also no "easy" test for IBD. Hence a lot of potential causes will have to be ruled out before the diagnosis is made.

If your dog or cat shows regular signs of gastrointestinal upset, for example vomiting, diarrhoea, straining to defecate, bloody or mucusy stools or weight loss, IBD is one of the possible explanations. You should seek veterinary advice for how to best approach this in the individual case of your pet. Initial diagnostic tests also are dependent on what your vet finds to be normal or abnormal on physical examination and initial tests.

# What should I do if my dog has chronic vomiting and/ or diarrhoea?

"Chronic" in the medical sense means to be present for longer than 3 weeks. However, if diarrhoea is going on for longer than 1 week or associated with lethargy/ weakness, lack of appetite, pain or severe vomiting so that your pet cannot keep anything "down" you should seek veterinary help earlier than that. Vomiting can be a sign of a serious disease and be an emergency (obstruction of the intestines with a foreign body, organ failure, life-threatening hormone diseases), so even with acute vomiting that does not subside within 24 hours, you should seek veterinary advice.

# What to expect from a visit to the DIGEST clinic for this condition with my pet?

If you are referred to the DIGEST clinic with your pet, it is likely that he/ she suffers from chronic/ ongoing vomiting, diarrhoea, and/ or weight loss where your vet has already ruled out "emergency" causes for these signs. That means we will see your pet because further investigations and "rule outs" of several conditions that can cause your pets problems need to be performed. Usually, this involves a number of blood tests, urine tests, faecal tests and diagnostic imaging procedures (for example ultrasound). If initial tests do not show any obvious cause, we usually recommend an endoscopy procedure with biopsies. For this, we look down your pet's stomach and intestine with a camera and take small tissue samples at the same time for later analysis. If your animal is not eating well, we might also suggest to place a feeding tube at the same time. Only if all of the mentioned tests

come back "normal" and your dog has a form of inflammation in the gut that shows up on the biopsies, can we call this condition "Inflammatory Bowel Disease".

# What are the treatments my pet is likely to receive if diagnosed with this disease?

About 80% of cases of IBD in dogs (and slightly less in cats) can be managed with the right food alone. Usually, we chose a so called hydrolysed protein diet. This means that the proteins in the diet are prepared in a way that they cannot elicit an "overreaction" of the immune system. This type of new diet is trialled for at least 3-4 weeks in dogs and 1-2 weeks cats. If a partial response occurs (clinical signs improved but not gone), this can be prolonged to 8-12 weeks. If a diet does not resolve signs at all, the next step is usually to administer specific types of antibiotics that can modify the gut flora and hence reduce inflammation. Again, this is usually done for 2-4 weeks. If this also does not resolve clinical signs, anti-inflammatory medication has to be given. This is usually in the form of steroids, but in severe cases or in patients that cannot be given steroids for other reasons, different types of immosuppressant drugs can be given**. It is important to note that we strongly advice to NOT give any steroids or other immune-modulatory drugs BEFORE any biopsy procedure (for example endoscopy) is planned,** as they can interfere with the biopsy sample results. In particular, the differentiation between severe inflammation and certain types of gut cancer (ie. lymphoma) can be impossible to make if patients have been pre-treated with steroids.

# How long does it take to get better?

This is very different from animal to animal and depending on whether they are food-, antibiotic- or steroid-responsive (see above). Usually each step of treatment is given for 2-4 weeks. Overall, you should expect that it might take weeks to months for most patients to recover. Some patients do not get better with these standard treatment approaches, and alternative or combination treatments have to be sought. This can include the administration of probiotic cocktails or a procedure called Faecal Microbiota Transplantation (FMT). You can read more about this in the section of our website on ongoing studies.

# What can I do to help advance understanding of this condition in small animals?

We are currently running a number of different studies and clinical trials to improve our understanding of this condition. Please see other information leaflets and the section of our website on ongoing studies for more details!

# The DIGEST clinic team

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