

Metropolitan Veterinary Hospital

Akron Veterinary Internal Medicine/Oncology Practice

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Megaesophagus

Client Handout

What is megaesophagus ?

Megaesophagus is a condition in dogs and cats where the esophagus musculature is weak, becomes dilated and does not have the ability to carry food or water to the stomach in a normal fashion.

What causes megaesophagus?

This is a condition that can occur as a primary disorder or secondary to esophageal obstruction or neuromuscular dysfunction. There are two types of megaesophagus; congenital (born with the disease) and acquired. Common cause include:

Congenital

- congenital idiopathic megaesophagus (birth defect)
- vascular ring anomaly

Acquired

- acquired idiopathic megaesophagus- #1 cause Idiopathic refers to a condition where the exact cause is unknown.
- esophageal obstruction- foreign body, stricture
- neuromuscular disease- Myasthenia gravis, polymyositis, polyneuritis, SLE, neoplasia (cancer)
- miscellaneous causes- esophagitis, hypothyroidism, hypoadrenocorticism, thymoma, lead toxicity or thallium toxicity.

How is megaesophagus diagnosed?

A diagnosis of megaesophagus is often made by a veterinarian based on patient history and physical exam findings and is usually confirmed with radiographs (x-rays). The animal comes to the clinic with a history of "vomiting" which is really regurgitation of food. (regurgitation is the passive expulsion of food and/or water from the mouth that never made it to the stomach). The animal may also present with a cough, which is a sign of aspiration pneumonia. Other common signs may include bad breath, a noticeable bulge in the neck or a painful neck. Radiographs of the chest reveal a large, flaccid esophagus often filled with food, fluid or even a lung pattern consistent with aspiration pneumonia.

What breeds are susceptible?

Some predisposed breeds include; wirehair fox terrier, miniature schnauzer, German shepherd, Great Dane, Newfoundland, Irish setter, Shar Pei, pug, greyhound. It is important to note that this condition can occur in any pure or mixed breed and in cats.

Once diagnosed how can my pet be best reated or managed?

Unless a treatable cause is found most animals diagnosed with megaesophagus cannot be cured with medical treatment. Patients with megaesophagus must rely on medical management to decrease the chance of aspiration pneumonia and further dilation. This is best accomplished in the following manner:

- 1.)Feeding in an elevated position. Forcing the animal to stand on its rear legs causes the esophagus to assume a more vertical orientation thus allowing gravity to assist in the delivery of food and water to the stomach and out of the esophagus.
- 2.)Feed smaller meals at an increased frequency throughout the day.
- 3.) Experiment with different consistencies of food. Some animals do better with food in a gruel like consistency while others do well with canned food rolled into small meatballs.
- 4.) After each meal maintain the animal in a standing position, on its rear legs, for 10 to 15 minutes.
- 5.) Gastronomy tubes may be necessary in cases with severe regurgitation.

What is my pet's prognosis?

The prognosis for megaesophagus is guarded when there is a positive response to medical management and very poor when they do not respond. In cases where an underlying cause can be found the prognosis is dependent on the management of that condition. The major cause of death in these patients is aspiration pneumonia and chronic weight loss. Chances of aspiration pneumonia can be lessened with good dietary management, but unfortunately, despite good management, aspiration pneumonia may still occur.