

Holiday Foreign Bodies

Pets have the unfortunate tendency to eat things they shouldn't, and this time we are not talking about food. During the holiday season items such as Easter grass, ribbon and other decorations can find their way into pet stomachs. But items like ribbon, decorative grass and other similarly shaped objects can pose an additional threat due to their shape.

These linear structures are often unable to be passed completely through the gastrointestinal tract if consumed, and become what is known as a linear foreign body. As opposed to other types of foreign bodies which may get lodged in a focal section of the gastrointestinal tract, linear foreign bodies can partially move forward in the gut while another portion of the object remains lodged in place. The intestines will attempt to continue to move the object forward as if it were food, but because the foreign body is still lodged elsewhere, the bowel ends up cinching up around linear object similar to the drawstring channel on pants. This type of folding upon itself is called "plication" and is the hallmark of a linear foreign body. If the foreign body is not removed, the object has the potential to cut through the gastrointestinal tract leading to life-threatening infection.

Signs that may suggest a foreign body include poor appetite, vomiting and diarrhea. Listlessness comes soon after due to dehydration and discomfort. If a pet is suspected of having a foreign body, imaging of the pet is indicated to attempt to identify the object, as well as lab work to ensure there are no indications of further complications such as infection. Linear foreign bodies can be difficult to diagnose when there is no witness to the pet consuming the object. Strings and ribbon are too small to see on x-rays and other items like garland may not show up either. Frequently, the only hint may be evidence of the "plication" affect mentioned earlier on x-ray or ultrasound, but that is not always seen.

Unfortunately the only treatment for these type foreign bodies is surgery, otherwise it can become fatal. Prompt diagnosis allows for prompt removal of the foreign body before the bowel is badly damaged. In more advanced cases, sections of damaged bowel may have to be removed.

As a side note, although not a cause for gastrointestinal obstruction, Easter lilies are toxic to cats so please be mindful of this if your family is gifted one this holiday season. Any part of the plant is capable of causing kidney failure and should therefore not go into the home or planted in the yard of a house with cats.

So while we celebrate this Easter season, please ensure that those items meant to decorate your house or finalize the Easter Bunny's gift baskets are safely out of the reach of your pets.