

Gastrointestinal surgery

Gastrointestinal (GI) surgery is routinely performed in dogs and cats for a variety of reasons. Most commonly, your pet may ingest something that they shouldn't have eaten, and it causes a problem—it may be causing an obstruction to the stomach or bowel, or it may be causing your pet to become ill due to its composition, like with batteries or zinc pennies. In many cases, removal of the foreign object is necessary.

Most of the pets that require GI surgery are showing some kind of signs related to the GI tract, including vomiting, nausea, inappetence, diarrhea or abdominal pain. These patients may be seen at your regular doctor and may receive radiographs or an abdominal ultrasound to try to diagnose the problem. If these are not conclusive, CT of the abdomen may be helpful to determine if surgery is needed.

During surgery, the abdomen is opened, and the GI tract is inspected. The stomach is palpated to identify foreign material within it. The intestine is inspected by “running” it—going through inch by inch to find any problems that might be present. The colon and cecum are inspected similarly.

When a foreign object is located, the stomach or intestine is isolated from the rest of the abdomen to prevent contamination. The organ is incised, and the foreign object is removed. The incision in the organ is then sutured closed to prevent leakage of stomach or intestinal contents.

Sometimes, a linear foreign body may be present. These types of foreign bodies get hung up inside the stomach but have a part of the foreign body that starts to make its way into the intestine. The intestine bunches up around the part of the foreign body that it's trying to pass, but unfortunately, because the material is firmly anchored in the stomach, it can't be passed through. As the intestine continues to try to push the foreign material through, it starts to look like a pants waist on a draw string. The intestine becomes severely inflamed, and can tear easily, possibly leading to intestinal leakage into the abdominal cavity.

Sometimes, the foreign body is lodged in the intestine and causes so much inflammation and pressure on the intestinal wall that the wall necroses. In these cases, the intestine that is affected needs to be removed. This is called a resection and anastomosis, where the affected segment is removed, and the bowel is sutured back together.

Sometimes, your pet will get lucky, and we will be able to push the foreign object into the colon so that your pet may naturally eliminate it. In these cases, we may not have to make an incision into the stomach or bowel, so there is much lower risk for post operative complications.

Very occasionally, we may find that there is not an obstruction causing the clinical signs even though it was highly suspected. In these cases, biopsies of the intestine and stomach are taken to further illuminate the possible cause of the problem. The samples are submitted for histopathology so they can be inspected by a pathologist under a microscope to find a diagnosis.

There are definitely other reasons your pet may require GI surgery, and unfortunately, cancer may be one of those reasons. If your pet has a mass in the GI tract, our goal is to remove it with a wide margin of normal appearing tissue and then suture the remaining stomach or bowel back together. This may be by removing a section of stomach or doing a resection and anastomosis of the bowel. We then send the mass to the diagnostic lab, so they can let us know what the mass consists of and what future courses of treatment are recommended.

Because dogs and cats don't "learn" not to chew on things, if your pet has experienced a foreign body, we recommend some lifestyle changes for the owners! Please make whatever your pet likes to inappropriately ingest stay out of their reach. If this isn't possible, consider a basket muzzle for while your pet is unsupervised.

Popular things for dogs to eat include socks, underwear, toys, pacifiers, and anything that has had food on it (sticks, pits, packages, etc.). Cats tend to prefer things like string, thread, hair ties, and occasionally toys.

Please train yourself to keep things that could be harmful out of your pet's reach!