

WHAT IS PANCREATITIS?

The pancreas is an organ that sits just beneath the stomach and the first part of the small intestine. It is responsible for producing enzymes that aid in digestion and is also the source of insulin production. Pancreatitis refers to an inflammation of this organ. It can happen to dogs and cats of any age, breed or sex. If severe, pancreatitis can lead to irreversible changes in the pancreas and impaired function long term.

The cause of pancreatitis in dogs and cats is not very well understood. There are a few things that we know can predispose to the development of pancreatitis such as fatty diets, certain drugs, underlying diseases, parasites and trauma however, there is also some research that indicates there are genetic factors at play as well.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF PANCREATITIS?

Dogs with pancreatitis may be lethargic, lose their appetite, and have vomiting or diarrhea. They may also exhibit pain in the abdomen. Cats can be more vague with signs ranging from poor appetite and fever to an elevated heart rate. Unlike dogs, they are less likely to have abdominal pain and vomiting.

HOW DO WE DIAGNOSE PANCREATITIS?

The diagnosis of pancreatitis can be very difficult as there is no one test that is specific for this problem. Generally, your veterinarian will start with a suspicion of pancreatitis based on history and physical exam findings. Abdominal radiographs and routine blood tests are usually the first step in obtaining a diagnosis.

Another diagnostic test that can prove to be very useful in the diagnosis of pancreatitis is abdominal ultrasound.

In some situations, biopsy of the pancreas may be required as it is difficult to differentiate pancreatitis from pancreatic cancer without a biopsy.

HOW DO WE TREAT PANCREATITIS?

The treatment of pancreatitis can vary greatly depending on the severity and duration of the illness. Patients with mild pancreatitis may be treated conservatively at home while those with severe disease will require hospitalization and intensive care.

WHAT ARE THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF PANCREATITIS?

In some instances, if the pancreatitis is severe or longstanding, there can be long term side effects. The one seen most often is diabetes mellitus. Because insulin is produced in the pancreas, severe disease and subsequent scarring of the pancreas may result in insufficient insulin production which leads to diabetes.

Animals that have recovered from pancreatitis are also more prone to developing it again in the future. For this reason, your veterinarian will help develop a long-term diet plan that will help minimize the risk of this occurring.