

THE USE AND ABUSE OF PROBIOTICS

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Yes; I love probiotics! My co-author, Diana Laverdure, and I consider them to be a functional superfood. As many of you know, probiotics are microorganisms, or “good” bacteria that provide beneficial effects to humans and animals, including preventing the overgrowth of bad bacteria in the gut, improving gastrointestinal health, and delaying or preventing the onset of food sensitivities. Recent research indicates that probiotics may offer anti-cancer benefits also. I believe dogs should be given probiotics regularly for *these* reasons.

Are you giving probiotics for the reasons listed above or to manage chronic diarrhea? Yes; probiotics can help manage diarrhea. But, I believe that their popularity can make us not see the forest for the trees. We need to step back and survey what could be causing the diarrhea. Throwing a probiotic at the symptom may be masking a bigger, progressive condition that needs to be medically diagnosed for best management. Yes; probiotics may be a part of the regimen once a diagnosis is found but we first must do due diligence.

The Hardest Question

Let’s start with the most basic yet hardest question for any pet caregiver to answer, “Are you overfeeding your pet?” You might not think so. We have become so hooked on the euphoria we feel from indulging our pets that we now think a pudgy dog is the new normal. As we all know, overfeeding leads to weight gain and can add to stool size. On top of that, obesity is the leading health threat to companion dogs and makes your dog prone to conditions such as osteoarthritis, cancer and diabetes.

Even though your veterinarian has asked you to shave off a couple of your dog’s pounds, you may still not categorize him as overweight. Yes; he is. Over 52.7% of US dogs are considered overweight or obese. The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention’s dog-to-human weight ratio comparison is approximate but eye-opening and should make you heed the doctor’s orders.

- A Pomeranian should weigh around 7 pounds. One extra pound on a Pomeranian is the equivalent of a 5’4” woman being 21 pounds overweight. Pomeranians are susceptible to tracheal collapse, and less weight helps to alleviate the symptoms of the condition.
- A Sheltie should weigh approximately 20 pounds. 3 extra pounds is an additional 22 pounds on the same average height woman.
- A Rottweiler should weigh around 100 pounds. 16 extra pounds equates to 23 pounds extra pounds on a 5’4” woman.

You need to remember to account for the total caloric intake, including treats. Try cutting back on the amount of treats and providing healthier treats like carrots, apples, pears, bananas or blueberries. Also, cut back on the amount you are feeding per meal. Several dog food manufacturers provide daily feeding ranges. Most of the time, we aim for the middle or top of the range when we should be aiming a bit lower. And, don’t forget to walk your dog!

If your dog is still not losing weight, I would have him properly tested for thyroid disorders as obesity is a common symptom of hypothyroidism. The preferred test measures the T4, FT4, T3, FT3 and TGAA antibodies in the blood. I would suggest this test to be completed at the laboratory I oversee, Hemopet Hemolife Diagnostics, or the equivalent test panel run at Michigan State University or the larger commercial veterinary clinical diagnostic laboratories.

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Too Skinny

Let's say your dog is too skinny and it is difficult to put weight on him. So, you add probiotics to firm up his stool in an effort to make him absorb more food. These could be symptoms of chronic pancreatitis or Exocrine Pancreatic Insufficiency (EPI). Pancreatitis, inflammation of the pancreas, disrupts the flow of digestive enzymes into the digestive tract and leaking them into the abdomen. Rapid enzymatic digestion of the exposed tissues occurs, along with serious clinical consequences. EPI occurs in dogs and cats whose cells that produce these digestive enzymes are damaged. Thus, the enzymes cannot function normally in the small intestine and you will end up with pasty colored, "cow pie"-like stools. A blood test will determine if your dog or cat is suffering from either condition. In the case of EPI, we would give pancreatic enzymes from another animal.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)

The symptoms of IBD include – but are not limited to – stomach cramps, bloating, gas, and diarrhea. Vomiting may also occur. Importantly, IBD causes inflammation that damages the gastrointestinal lining. Think of cat claws poking holes in your clothes. That's what the inflammation is doing to the gut lining, so toxic and foreign substances can flow into the bloodstream. IBD can be caused by an underlying genetic predisposition that runs in human and animal families when encountering a variety of environmental challenges.

IBD is diagnosed with an array of blood and urine tests and may require endoscopy with biopsy of the affected intestine. In many cases, the diagnosis is presumptive based upon the clinical signs and routine lab tests, and can be treated as such without resorting to endoscopy or biopsy.

Traditional treatment options are the use of corticosteroids and gastrointestinal antibiotics. While I do not like to rely on these conventional medication options due to the long-term side effects, occasionally or at least initially, we need to use them. Then, we can introduce probiotics and other bowel-supportive products like clay or slippery elm powder to lessen the effects – but not cure – the inflammation.

Food Sensitivity

A food sensitivity is the body's negative reaction to a protein it cannot tolerate or handle. In the first paragraph, I did state that probiotics can "delay the onset of food sensitivities." True. However, probiotics do not necessarily stop them. Importantly, if you add the probiotics after the diarrhea starts, your companion pet may already have the food sensitivity so you are chasing the bad with the good instead of taking care of the root problem. That's the same case with EPI. Upon diagnosis, you replace the digestive enzymes but if your dog is sensitive to the digestive enzyme's protein source then you are causing inflammation in the intestine. In the case of IBD, a food sensitivity is likely the cause. In these circumstances, you would need to figure out the protein causing the reaction. At the end of the day, a food sensitivity can affect any of the conditions noted above. This is why I recommend testing with [NutriScan](#). If you can eliminate one portion of the aggravation, then it is easier to manage these medical conditions.

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A Note about Food Transitioning

When changing diets, always transition your dog to the new diet gradually over a period of 10 to 14 days, substituting more of the new cooked or raw diet for the old diet each day. Digestive enzymes and probiotics should be given to help support the dog's digestive system through the transition period. Of course, transition only to the right proteins for your companion pet.

References

Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, 06 Nov. 2013. Web. 26 June 2016.

<http://www.petobesityprevention.org/>.

Dodds, Jean, DVM, and Diana Laverdure, MS. Canine Nutrigenomics: The New Science of Feeding Your Dog for Optimum Health. Wenatchee: Dogwise, 2015. Print.