

Dear Dr. Wise

Question: Our three-year-old Labrador gave us quite a scare last week. Waldemar ate one of our children's toys and it lodged in his digestive system. Surgery was performed to remove it and all is fine, but we're still shaky about the future and how we can detect problems like this before it is too late.

Answer: Obstructions of the intestines are never easy to diagnose. I realize that you want to know early signs of trouble so you can get help before the obstruction causes serious damage. No single test, however can tell us when an object is stuck in the intestines.

All you have to do is be warned if your dog stops eating, has uncontrolled vomiting and/or serious diarrhea or has pain in his abdomen. These signs may indicate a very serious problem, but more frequently they accompany mild bowel upsets due to internal parasites or a reaction to something that was eaten. Some dogs, for example, will have very severe bouts of vomiting and diarrhea from getting into the trash or even getting into too much fried chicken off the dinner table.

I know that you do not want to take Waldemar to the veterinarian every time he vomits because most of the time just one episode is not serious. Typically, a dog with a mild intestinal upset may vomit once but feel very perky and active and let you feel his stomach without showing pain. Usually withholding his food for a few hours will allow things to get back to normal and he will feel just fine.

When the problem is more serious, the signs of vomiting, diarrhea and pain will be very noticeable and will not subside. When you're home and these signs occur, you just have to use your judgment about taking the dog to the veterinarian.

If you take him in, the veterinarian will check his temperature, palpate his abdomen, ask questions about his eating habits over the past few days and maybe even use radiographs to determine the extent of the problem. Sometimes barium is used for the radiographs to try to outline the potential obstruction. Occasionally exploratory surgery is indicated.

As you can see, you play a very important role in determining when Waldemar may be sick enough for a veterinarian's examination. This is a general overview which I hope will be helpful, but I encourage you to discuss this with your veterinarian. I am sure he or she will be happy to help you decide when to come in and when it is not necessary.

If you have a question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, 201 S. Capitol Ave, Suite 405, Indianapolis, Indiana, 46225.