

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: Ivory, our six-month-old Labrador, is a big strong, rambunctious pup. Last night she gave us a terrible scare. She got a soup bone caught around her lower jaw and we couldn't budge it. We took her to the vet who gave her an anesthetic and dislodged the bone. How can we keep this from happening again – not just with bones, but also with toys?

Answer: Ivory's predicament is all too common. Dogs of all sizes and shapes come in with bones or chew toys jammed into the roof of the mouths, between their upper teeth of between their lower teeth.

Just last week we had a puppy with a ball stuck in the back of its throat. It was suffocating and almost on its last breath before we could remove the ball. We've also seen dogs in serious trouble from bones caught in the back of their mouth that go unnoticed. Over time, the bone can rub against the tissues of the mouth and stir up a serious infection.

To prevent such problems, I would avoid all types of chicken bones because they are small and easily can catch in the mouth, throat or any part of the digestive tract – including the intestine where they can perforate the walls.

Some animals will gingerly gnaw on "rawhide" treats and beef bones which help clean teeth as well as provide pleasure. But others will quickly crush the bone of toy and swallow the long splinters which can cause serious damage. I include beef bones because they are exceptionally tough and hard to break. But once crushed, they produce dangerous splinters.

I would also add balls to the dangerous list unless they are so big, they cannot lodge in the back of the throat. Super balls are particularly dangerous. Even tennis balls can be a problem for large dogs.

Toys made of hard rubber or nylon are quite safe. There's a product called Nylabone, a nylon bone-shaped treat. Dogs can chew on this for weeks and the bone only disappears as small threads of nylon are gnawed off. These threads are easily digested. The bones come in a variety of shapes and sizes. The important point is always to be aware of what your dog is playing with or eating. This will be particularly important as Thanksgiving and Christmas roll around. Each year we see pets who are sick from the fat in turkey skin or gravy or who have hurt themselves on bones. Dogs cannot handle grease. It can cause intestinal infection or more serious inflamed pancreas. Owners would be wise to stick with dog biscuits.

If you have a question about your pet, write to Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Avenue, Suite 405, Indianapolis, IN 46225