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Small Organ, Big Trouble

When rich food appears, pancreatitis lurks

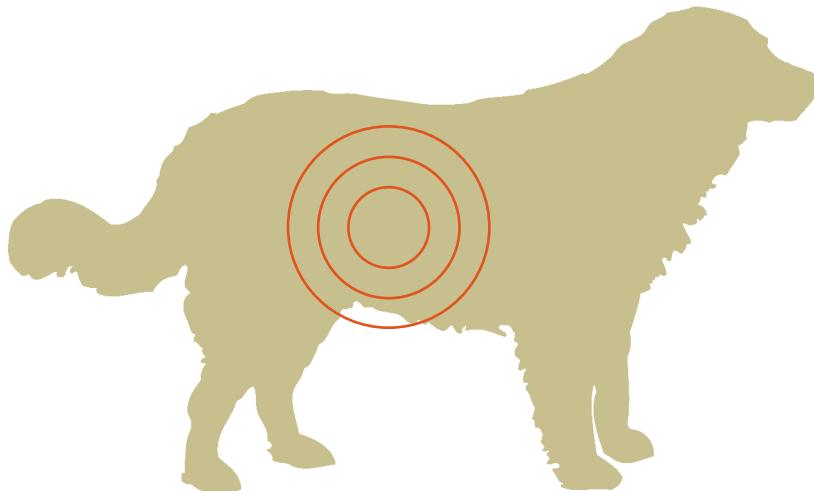
By Nancy Kay, DVM

'TIS THE SEASON FOR FAMILY GATHERINGS, gift giving and food galore. Veterinarians know that this is also the season for canine pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), a painful, potentially life-threatening condition most commonly caused by overindulgence in foods that are particularly rich or fatty. And what kitchen isn't overflowing with such foods this time of year?

The pancreas is a thin, delicate-appearing, boomerang-shaped organ that lives in the abdominal cavity, tucked up against the stomach and small intestine. While the pancreas may be diminutive in appearance, its actions are mighty! It is the body's source of insulin and enzymes necessary for food digestion. When pancreatitis is chronic or particularly severe, this little factory sometimes permanently closes down, resulting in diabetes mellitus and the need for insulin shots and/or exocrine pancreatic insufficiency requiring digestive enzyme replacement therapy.

When a dog eats, enzymes are released from the pancreas into the small intestine, where they are activated for food digestion. Sometimes, for reasons we do not understand, these enzymes are activated within the pancreas itself, resulting in the inflammation of pancreatitis. In addition to rich or fatty foods, certain drugs, hormonal imbalances and inherited defects in fat metabolism can also cause pancreatitis. For some dogs, an underlying cause is never found.

Classic pancreatitis symptoms include vomiting, abdominal pain, and decreased



appetite and activity levels. Short of performing a pancreatic biopsy (an invasive and risky procedure), diagnosing pancreatitis can be challenging, because noninvasive tests are fraught with false-negative and false-positive results. Veterinarians must rely on a combination of the following:

- A history of dietary indiscretion, vomiting and lethargy.
- Physical examination findings (particularly abdominal pain).
- Characteristic complete blood cell count (CBC) and blood chemistry abnormalities.
- A positive or elevated Spec cPL (canine pancreas-specific lipase) blood test.
- Characteristic abdominal ultrasound abnormalities.

There is no cure for pancreatitis—much like a bruise, the inflammation must re-

solve on its own. This is best accomplished by allowing the pancreas to rest, which means giving nothing orally (not even water) to prevent digestive enzyme secretion. Treatment consists of hospitalization for the administration of intravenous fluids; injectable medication to control vomiting, pain and stomach-acid secretion; and antibiotics to prevent secondary infection or abscess formation. Dogs should be monitored around the clock for the life-threatening complications that sometimes accompany pancreatitis, such as kidney failure, heart rhythm abnormalities, respiratory distress and bleeding disorders.

Small amounts of water and a fat-free diet are typically offered once vomiting has stopped, abdominal pain has subsided, and there is blood test and/or ultrasound confirmation that the inflammation has calmed down. If your dog has pancreatitis, count on a minimum of two to three days of hospitalization,

and be sure to ask who will be caring for your dog during the night. Long-term treatment for pancreatitis typically involves feeding a low-fat or fat-free diet. This may be a life-long recommendation, especially if your dog has been a “repeat offender.” Most dogs fully recover with appropriate therapy; however, some succumb to the complications associated with this disease.

How can you prevent pancreatitis during this food-oriented time of year? You can avoid feeding holiday leftovers altogether (this would cause canine mutiny in my household) or you can heed the following recommendations.

New foods should be fed sparingly and only if well tolerated by your dog’s gastrointestinal tract and waistline. Keep in mind that whether offered a teaspoon or a tablespoon of something delicious, most dogs will gulp it down in the same amount of time and reap the same psychological benefit.

Don’t offer tidbits from the table while you are eating. This is a set up for bad behavior. Offer the treat only after you’ve left the table.

If you shouldn’t be eating the food

ADOPT ME!



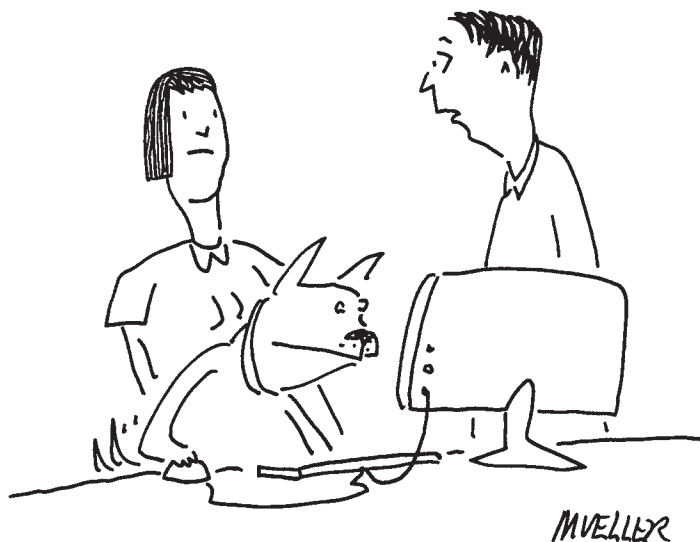
Little Stilton is a playful Lhasa/Miniature Poodle-mix puppy with soft grey fur.

Milo Foundation, San Rafael, Calif. milofoundation.org

SMILER

yourself (emphasis on *shouldn’t*), please don’t feed it to your dog! By all means, give your precious poopsie a bit of turkey breast, but without the turkey skin or fat-laden mashed potatoes and creamy gravy. Go ahead and offer your sweet snookums a bite of brisket, but please—no potato latkes or sour cream! Bear in mind that most dogs are so darned excited about getting a treat, they don’t care what it is, only that they’re getting it!

Some people dream of sugar plum fairies, a white Christmas or a stress-free family gathering. I’m dreaming of a holiday season in which not a single dog develops pancreatitis! I wish you and your four-legged family a happy and healthy holiday season. **B**



WELL I CERTAINLY DIDN'T SHOW HER
HOW TO GOOGLE RABBITS.

Family Dog

The dogs of our lives

TAKEN IN 1901 AT LAKIN, KAN., this photo shows brothers James and Victor Tate and their pup Judge (patiently serving as a cushion for Victor) and was sent in by their grandniece, Kristen Adame. The Tate family ran the town’s general store from the early 1880s until about 1995. James, who attended the U.S. Naval Academy, died at the age of 21 in the 1918 flu epidemic. Victor also attended the academy and retired from the U.S. Navy in the 1950s. Judge’s story: Lakin was a rural community, and even dogs living on Main Street ran free. One day, Judge disappeared, and the children were heartbroken. Then, about a year later, James and his father, George, made a trip to Ulysses, a town about 30 miles south of Lakin. And there on the street, sitting outside a café, was a dog who looked a lot like Judge! On closer inspection, the dog turned out to be their lost pooch, who had apparently been dognapped and used to help herd cattle in Ulysses. Happily, Judge was returned to the family, and lived out the rest of his considerable life as the Tates’ family dog.

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