

# Esophagitis and Esophageal Stricture

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## BASIC INFORMATION

### Description

The esophagus is a muscular tube that carries swallowed food and water from the mouth to the stomach. The esophagus is very sensitive to damage from stomach acid, so any medical problem leading to excess stomach acid in the esophagus can cause inflammation, which is called *esophagitis*. In people, the same condition is called *heartburn* or *acid reflux disease*.

Some animals with severe esophagitis will later form an esophageal stricture—scarring that reduces the esophageal diameter. When the diameter of the esophagus is reduced by a stricture, the animal is less able to swallow food and water.

### Causes

The esophagus can be exposed to stomach acid during profuse vomiting or gastric reflux, from eating high-fat foods, or during or after an anesthetic procedure. Esophagitis can also occur with some forms of food allergy, certain infections, and after trauma from ingestion of foreign bodies. Structural abnormalities of the esophagus, such as a hernia, may predispose the animal to esophagitis. Certain oral medications and the ingestion of irritating materials can also cause esophagitis.

### Clinical Signs

Esophagitis can be painful, causing affected dogs and cats to lose their appetite. If the animal has difficulty swallowing, drooling of saliva and regurgitation of food or water may be seen.

When an esophageal stricture is present, food and water are less able to travel to the stomach, and the animal may act very hungry. Water and very soft food may be able to pass through the stricture, but harder foods, such as kibble or biscuits, may be regurgitated.

A possible complication of both esophagitis and esophageal stricture is aspiration pneumonia, which develops when food or liquids are inhaled into the lungs. If aspiration pneumonia is present, coughing, fever, lethargy, and halitosis (bad breath) may occur.

### Diagnostic Tests

Initially plain x-rays of the neck and chest are often done to assess the esophagus. It is common for more specialized x-rays to be taken after the patient has been given an oral contrast material that shows up white on an x-ray. This procedure is called an *esophagram*, and it is particularly useful if an esophageal stricture is suspected.

In some animals, esophagoscopy, which is examination of the interior of the esophagus with a rigid or flexible endoscope, is needed. Esophagoscopy is done with the animal anesthetized.

The endoscope allows the veterinarian to see foreign bodies, strictures, or ulcers in the esophagus and also allows biopsy samples to be obtained. Examination of the stomach and upper small intestines may be done at the same time.

Other tests may be recommended to rule out diseases that cause similar signs and to determine the underlying causes of any acid reflux present.

## TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

### Treatment Options

The esophagus is very susceptible to damage from stomach acid, so strong antacid medications are commonly prescribed. Other medications that help protect the esophagus from damage may also be started. Antibiotics and antifungal agents may be given for certain infections and for aspiration pneumonia. If regurgitation or vomiting is occurring, other drugs are administered to decrease these signs. Food is given in small meals, and usually softer foods are more readily accepted.

Animals with an esophageal stricture may require breakdown of the stricture. Strictures are usually treated by passing special water-filled balloon catheters into the esophagus while the animal is anesthetized. The catheter is passed into the area of the stricture and slowly expanded. Several such treatments may be necessary. Your veterinarian may recommend referral to a specialist who can perform this procedure.

Animals with severe esophageal damage may have a feeding tube placed into the stomach that allows the animal to receive food and water without passing them through the esophagus. The feeding tube usually stays in place for at least 2 weeks. Other therapies may be indicated, depending on the presence of any underlying cause of the esophagitis.

### Follow-up Care

Uncomplicated cases of esophagitis are usually rechecked 7-10 days after starting therapy and then periodically for several months. More intensive monitoring is needed in cases with severe esophagitis or strictures and after insertion of a feeding tube.

### Prognosis

Prognosis for recovery from uncomplicated esophagitis is usually good. Prolonged treatment may be required in some cases. Severe cases have a more guarded (uncertain) prognosis, particularly if aspiration pneumonia is present or a feeding tube is needed. Many animals with esophageal strictures return to more normal eating and esophageal function with treatment.