

Chew Treats

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Source: Dr. Marcella Ridgway

An archive of Pet Columns from the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine is available online at <http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/petcolumns/>.

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Chewing the dense treats helps keep teeth clean by scraping food debris and plaque from the teeth, minimizing tartar buildup. In addition, dogs enjoy the entertainment of chewing while exercising important chewing muscles.

However, health problems associated with these chew treats have recently raised concern amongst pet owners and the veterinary community. According to Dr. Marcella Ridgway, veterinary internal medicine specialist at the University of Illinois Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Urbana, these types of treats are digestible, but can potentially lodge in the pet's gastrointestinal tract.

Compressed vegetable chew treats are designed to be chewed into small bits, but Ridgway explains, "Dogs that tend to swallow these treats in just a few bites may have more gastrointestinal (GI) obstruction problems than those who chew them thoroughly. However, some of the dogs which developed GI obstruction reportedly chewed the treats in an appropriate manner, so other factors are likely involved in the development of GI obstruction."

Emergency veterinary clinics have reported cases of GI obstruction with green material obstructing the esophagus or small intestine of dogs that were fed Greenies®. This has initiated a review of data on GI obstruction cases due to compressed vegetable chew treats.

The reasons these types of treats lodge are not clear; Dr. Ridgway posits that the vegetable material may be stickier than other foods, may conform to shape of tubular organs, and/or may bind liquid and expand significantly.

Ridgway points out that any type of chew treat or chew toy can pose a risk if large amounts or large pieces are swallowed. "We also see esophageal obstruction with rawhide chews, which tend to get gooey and soft. Pieces of softened rawhide can also become caught in back of throat." This can be a serious problem if the airway gets obstructed.

The key to preventing problems with chew treats is to make sure your dog chews the treat properly. Dogs offered a new type of chew treat for the first time should be closely monitored.

"There is always some risk if pets are left alone with chew treats and toys that can be broken into pieces, even if the pet has never had a problem with the toys before," says Ridgway. "If you want to leave the dog with something to do while you are away, toys that are strong enough to not be chewed into smaller pieces while flexible enough not to injure teeth, such as durable rubber Kong®-like toys or chew ropes, should be safe for most dogs."

The Greenies® Web site similarly states, "As with any edible product, monitor your dog to ensure the treat is adequately chewed. Gulping any item can be harmful or even fatal to a dog."

Also, the Greenies® packaging and Web site (<http://www.greenies.com/feedingGuidelines.cfm>) list specific recommendations for choosing an appropriately-sized treat for your dog.

Signs that may indicate gastrointestinal obstruction in your pet include vomiting, regurgitation, and refusal to eat.

For more information regarding chew treats and GI obstruction hazards, consult your veterinarian.

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