

Digestive Health for the Modern Pet By Shannon Venegas

Pet lovers occasionally find themselves wishing their pets could talk. It would make our lives much easier (and much more interesting). But since humans are still unable to figure out what the common bark stands for, we have to do our best in preventative care to ensure the comfort of our pets, starting with their tummy health.

There are a variety of options available for pet owners to maintain their animal's digestive health. According to Dr. Chris Bessent, Wisconsin veterinarian and founder of Herbsmith, Inc., an herbal supplement company for animals, a daily digestive supplement is important for even the average everyday dog. "We live in such a toxic world," Bessent said. "Dogs and cats pick up toxins in their food, from the grass, from the ground and in their water." These toxins, along with a dog's diet and stress level, have a strong impact on its digestive system. Dogs are naturally scavenging, carnivorous animals. Since they've been domesticated and brought into the house to eat dry food, their diets have changed significantly.

Susie Bower, owner of End of the Leash, a dog supply store in Mukwonago, Wisconsin, said a daily digestive supplement is good for any dog to break down allergens and maintain good tummy flora which refers to the microorganisms that live in the digestive tract. A daily digestive supplement with a probiotic helps to keep gut health at its fullest and minimize the amount of challenge on the immune system from bad bacteria. "We always want to keep good bacteria in their gut," Bessent said. "Bad bacteria changes the bowel flora and can produce a lot of gas."

Dogs are stressed in general from toxicity load, environmental factors and by being fed high-grain or high-carbohydrate diets. These things change the good-to-bad ratio of bacteria in the gut, Bessent noted. In addition to just the everyday need for a supplement, some dogs require a special digestive boost. For example, a dog who is recovering from surgery or who is on an antibiotic or a daily non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication will need a good probiotic and prebiotic to help keep the balance of bacteria in the gut healthy.

Dr. Gretchen Jaeger, owner of Prairie Animal Hospital in North Prairie, Wisconsin, said pets that have been on medication for a while especially need a probiotic in their diet because the antibiotics kill off the normal bacteria level. Jaeger said a dog in need of a digestive supplement will be on long-term antibiotics and/or exhibit signs such as soft stool, mild diarrhea, vomiting or chronic infection. According to Bessent, the best digestive supplement is one that is all-encompassing and includes probiotics, prebiotics, digestive enzymes and herbs.

The key ingredient for a beneficial digestive supplement is a good probiotic. Probiotics are live bacterial microorganisms that are beneficial for the digestive system. One example of a probiotic is lactobacillus acidophilus, which is able to create lactic acid from fermenting milk sugars. This aids in digestion and helps encourage the absorption of minerals and calcium. Lactobacillus also has immunity boosting attributes. A prebiotic is a long-chain sugar that feeds good bacteria, encouraging the growth of beneficial bacteria in the digestive tract.

In addition to probiotics and prebiotics, key enzymes are a must in boosting your pet's digestive system. Digestive enzymes break down the nutrients in your pet's food. If your dog has any type of gastrointestinal (GI) upset, adding a digestive enzyme can aid in digestion and allow better absorption of nutrients..

According to Bower, most of the basic dog food brands are depleted of all their beneficial enzymes. "When the food is baked at anything over 120 degrees, the enzyme activity is no longer present in the dog food," Bower said. Examples of enzymes include protease which breaks down protein and amylase which breaks down carbohydrates. Protease digests proteins so amino acids can be absorbed by the intestinal wall. Lipase is another important enzyme that breaks down fats to be absorbed by the intestines. It also helps in reducing gas and bloating.

There are certain herbs that can be beneficial for the digestive system. Cinnamon, ginger and licorice aid in sugar metabolism and balance the gut while promoting bowel health. Cinnamon is known to relieve nausea and vomiting. It has also been known to warm and stimulate the digestive system. Ginger is helpful for discomfort after eating and has been used to treat a variety of gastrointestinal issues. Licorice is especially helpful in increasing the flow of bile. It can be used for heartburn and irritation in the digestive tract. Overall, these safe herbs are helpful in maintaining GI health.

Another important factor to remember when choosing a digestive supplement is the number of colony-forming units (CFUs) per serving in the product. CFUs are determined by taking a sample of the supplement and observing how many colonies of live bacteria are formed per gram in one day. Ideally, one serving of a supplement should contain at least ten billion CFUs.

Another thing to consider when shopping for a digestive supplement is the way it is stored. Moisture activates the growth of these good bacteria. Digestive supplements packaged in powder form in a container hold live bacteria when they are opened, but lose their affect by the time they are half gone. Digestive supplements containing microorganisms that are blister-packed in a capsule keep the formula safe and alive until it enters the pet's system.

Even though our animals cannot tell us when their tummies are upset, pet owners can do their best to prevent discomfort. A dog's stomach can be upset just as often as a humans, and it's important to pay attention to the warning signs to prevent a problem before it occurs. A good probiotic and prebiotic along with beneficial herbs and enzymes are essential to promote digestive health.

Helpful Resources:

University of Maryland Medical Center, www.umm.edu
Herbwisdom.com
Enzymeessentials.com