

It's only a matter of days now until the official start of what's been called the "Eating Season". Thanksgiving marks the start of a four-week period of eating that sometimes leaves us feeling more sick than satiated (though some of us with children might argue that Halloween, and all its attendant candy, is the actual start of this traditional feeding frenzy). With eating being such a big part of our lives for the next few weeks I thought it only appropriate that this month's column address nutritional issues. But instead of wading into the quagmire of general healthy-pet nutrition (Doctor, what's the best brand of dog food...?) I thought it would be more interesting to discuss nutritional concerns in sick animals. The nutrition I'm talking about is critical care nutrition.

To some degree we veterinarians have largely overlooked the nutritional needs of sick patients; preferring to focus more on lab and other diagnostic tests, IV fluid care and medications in our effort to nudge our patients toward recovery. Don't get me wrong, diagnostics and pharmaceuticals are obviously central in the evaluation and care of any sick or injured patient, but I believe aggressively addressing the nutritional needs of severely ill patients can many times mean the difference between success and failure.

We know that the injured or seriously ill patient can require up to two or more times the daily calories compared to a healthy animal. Yet, when you look at these patients sitting quietly or sleeping in the hospital cage you wouldn't guess that they are in metabolic overdrive. These extra calories (nutritional energy) are needed for vital healing and recovery processes such as tissue repair, excess waste removal, and augmented immune responses.

Many pet owners mistakenly think that when their animal is in the hospital and has an intravenous (IV) line running to them, they are "being fed intravenously". This is not actually the case. Most IV fluid solutions are essentially water with some sodium, potassium and other electrolytes. Sometimes these solutions will have varying amounts of sugar as well, but they are not really IV "food". Keep in mind, when first presented with a critical or severely ill patient, fluids and electrolytes will usually be the first thing we reach for; but once the patient is stable, nutritional support becomes very important.

How do we deliver nutrition to a critically ill patient? Well, the saying goes "if the gut works-use it". Obviously, if a patient will eat, simply feeding them would work. Sometimes an animal will not eat voluntarily but will if we gently place some food in their mouth. Some use the term "force-feeding" to describe this method. More commonly though sick patients have no interest in eating, and are overly stressed by the force-feeding process. For these patients we will use a feeding tube. A small soft tube is placed and secured so that we can administer liquid food directly into the gastrointestinal tract (usually the stomach). All these tubes are temporary with some types designed to stay in place for a few days while others are meant for weeks of nutritional support of the patient. At first glance most pet owners are understandably hesitant to have a feeding tube placed in their pet; but once they understand that it is only temporary, and well tolerated by their pet, they become more comfortable with the idea. And once they see how nutritional support helps their pet improve, most pet owners become big proponents feeding tubes.

What do we do when the gut isn't working? In some patients the gastrointestinal tract is just not up to taking in even small amounts of food. In these cases nutritional elements such as protein, carbohydrate, and fats in a sterile liquid form can be given directly into the blood stream. This somewhat sophisticated feeding method, called parenteral nutrition, requires special intravenous catheters, as well as carefully formulated fluids, and therefore is relatively more expensive than intestinal feeding. Fortunately, parenteral nutritional support is not very often needed, as the GI tract of most sick pets is usually able to tolerate some food.

What kinds of food are fed to sick hospitalized patients? There are many types of critical care nutrition products available; and it's a good thing because every patient's health problem is unique, so we need many nutritional options for these animals. Some patients may need only a "trickle" of sugar water at first, then as they gain strength we might move to a more complex diet designed specifically for the health problem at hand. Sometimes we'll use a food blender to make a liquid diet that can be delivered through a feeding tube. As the patient recovers, and their appetite returns, they are gradually returned to their regular diet.

While feeding sick animals won't correct every medical condition, I believe there are many animals that are alive today because of the nutritional support they received while ill. Critical care nutritional support will add some cost (special feeding systems and diets) to the care of the patient but the results are often well worth the expense. Actually, if nutritional support can help to hasten the recovery effort it may very well reduce the overall costs of returning a pet to health. Remember, expensive food is cheap medicine!

So later this week, as you sit down to eat that traditional Thanksgiving meal, think of all the sick animals in veterinary hospitals around the country. While they won't likely be served savory turkey with all the trimmings, hopefully they'll be getting the medical equivalent of that traditional favorite. And with any luck they'll soon be back home with their families to enjoy the rest of the Holiday, or should I say "Eating", Season.

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