



Diarrhea Debate: Metronidazole vs Probiotics

Diarrhea in our cats and dogs can be a stressful ailment to manage; more trips outside or to the litterbox, and sometimes they don't make it to the right place and have accidents on the floor. Luckily there are a few veterinary solutions to get your pet's gut back to its regular routine.

The first tool at our disposal when trying to clear diarrhea is a bland diet. Combine white rice or pasta with boiled and drained meat. A mixture of approximately 3 times more rice or pasta than meat is usually adequate. For the meat, hamburger, chicken, turkey, or lamb can be used and it should be unseasoned. Small meals should be fed frequently - offering 4-6 divided meals throughout the day should suffice. Once the diarrhea has cleared, your pet can gradually be returned to their regular diet and feeding schedule. Sometimes a bland diet is enough to return your pet's stool to normal, but other times more intervention is required.

For decades, Metronidazole has been the veterinary go-to for diarrhea treatment, especially diarrhea of an unknown cause. Metronidazole is an antibacterial and antiprotozoal medication; this means it is an antibiotic as well as an antiparasitic. This medication is very effective in treating Giardia, IBD, and diarrhea caused by organ insufficiency, such as pancreatic insufficiency and liver disease - which are all chronic conditions. Recent studies show that this medication may not be the best option for acute diarrhea.

Metronidazole is a very strong antibiotic and therefore has the potential to significantly disrupt the gut microbiome. This means it can reduce the amount of bacteria in the gut - including the good bacteria - for weeks to months after the medication has been finished. Additionally, using strong antibiotics to treat acute issues can lead to drug-resistant bacteria. This is a concern for pets, as well as their owners; drug-resistant bacteria in the environment can potentially infect whole households.

Recently, studies have shown that probiotics are just as or even more effective in treating the symptoms of acute diarrhea. Probiotics are dietary supplements that contain live microorganisms that are beneficial to the gut. Normally, humans and animals have populations of these microorganisms living in and on their bodies without causing harm, and in some cases providing protection against disease causing organisms. Probiotics are used to support and replenish these normal populations of microorganisms when they have been disrupted by medications, diet changes, disease processes, or stress. In clinical trials, probiotics were shown to relieve the symptoms of diarrhea just as fast as metronidazole, if not faster.

Diarrhea can be difficult to manage, talk to your veterinarian about the best choice of treatment for your pet. If medications or probiotics do not resolve the symptoms of diarrhea, additional testing may be needed to address the root of the problem. Diagnostics including a fecal parasite test and/or blood work may be recommended and then your veterinarian will create a treatment plan specifically for your pet and their needs.