

ELECTIVE GASTROPEXY:**Planning ahead to prevent life-threatening bloat**

Overview—“I don’t understand what a gastropexy procedure is; please help me understand the condition and the treatment.”

The gastropexy defined: *gastro-* means stomach; *-pexy* means permanent connection between body parts. The gastropexy procedure creates a permanent scar (“adhesion”) between the stomach wall and the body wall. There are many large and giant breed dogs that have a predisposition for their stomach to flip—called gastric volvulus—usually as a result of the stomach distending with air—called gastric dilatation. Both of which can be life-threatening, more so if both happen. If the stomach is made to stay attached to the body wall, it cannot flip or twist on itself and cause gastric dilatation with volvulus (GDV). When a dog develops a GDV, they develop severe shock, their stomach wall may lose its blood supply irreversibly, and they may die without, or even with, aggressive treatment.

“Why is this procedure being recommended for my pet?”

When performed electively or prophylactically, we are choosing to do a gastropexy procedure in a pet who has the breed or body shape that is highly predisposed to GDV. This gastropexy procedure is also performed in the emergency setting when a dog presents with GDV, but that patient is much less stable, has a much higher anesthetic risk, and irreparable stomach wall damage may have occurred due to the twisted and distended stomach.

“What options do I have to treat my pet’s potential problem?”

The gastropexy procedure can be performed electively/prophylactically using several different surgical techniques. “Incisional” and “beltloop” are the two most common technical methods of surgically creating the adhesion/pexy. The surgical approach to the abdomen can be achieved by enlarging a routine spay incision, by creating a small incision in the upper abdomen and/or by multiple tiny incisions using a laparoscope.

This is used as a prophylactic procedure, meaning we choose to have it performed because the risk:benefit ratio is tilted in favor of benefits. If a pet is not statistically at risk for GDV, then statistically it is not logical. That is not to say an individual dog will not develop a GDV; it just says they are unlikely to and the risks of doing an elective anesthesia and gastropexy might be higher than the risk of ever developing GDV.

“What postoperative complications do I need to know and understand when considering this surgery?”

The act of cutting the stomach wall and sewing it to the body wall to form a permanent “pexy” will result in transient disturbance of the normal stomach contractions. This may show up in a postoperative patient as poor appetite, abdominal discomfort for up to a week or so. Often we treat this possible complication by sending home medications that stimulate stomach contractions during the first week postoperatively.

Very, very rarely, if the stomach wall is punctured accidentally while cutting and sewing, a serious abdominal infection can develop and require additional surgical and medical treatment.

“Are there situations when the surgical outcome is not what we hoped it would be?”

For the prophylactic benefit to work, the permanent attachment of the stomach to the body wall must be present. If that scar tissue does not form or forms poorly, this attachment is not doing the job we expected. It is not obvious from the outside of the pet whether the “pexy” is doing its job. An xray of the abdomen can help us answer that question; and an abdominal ultrasound (“sonogram”) gives us a good picture too.

Usually, we won't know about the status of the "pexy" until and unless a problem with the stomach or other abdominal organ. If you notice ongoing abdominal discomfort months and years after a gastropexy, it would be beneficial to have this problem evaluated.

"How is my pet's life and lifestyle likely to change after this procedure?"

There are rarely any changes or concerns long term postoperatively. It must be clear, though, that the stomach can still distend with gas to the point of being dangerous, even though the gastropexy was performed. The stomach is unlikely to twist during this distension, so overall risk is much lower. This distension still must be recognized, treated and monitored.

The gastropexy procedure dramatically reduces the occurrence of GDV, but will not change the likelihood of gastric distension. Moving forward through the dog's life, make sure to alert any veterinary professionals who work with your pet that a gastropexy has been performed. And be alert to the signs of gastric distension too.

"Are there things I can do to prepare myself, my home and/or my pet for this procedure?"

After surgery, the connection between the stomach and the body wall must heal and become permanent while remaining close together. To prevent stretching of this connection during healing, we recommend feeding smaller volumes of food more frequently (i.e. don't load up the stomach and make it heavy such that it pulls on the healing site.) A minimum of 2x daily is recommended; 3-4x daily feeding of smaller amounts is ideal.

Similarly, vigorous activity will result in bouncing and stretching of this surgical connection. It takes up to six weeks for scar tissue to reach early maturity. We recommend avoiding high levels of activity during this healing timeframe.

Outpatient surgery and anesthesia can be uncomfortable, painful, disorienting, and frustrating experiences for animals; watching your pet work through the early postoperative period and recover from anesthesia and pain medications can be worrisome, scary and frustrating for pet owners. The vast majority of the time this period of difficulty is brief, and *your pet is actually more comfortable and secure at home with you*. Sometimes it doesn't feel like that at two in the morning when your pet is anxious and not consolable, and you are unsure of what to do. You always have the option of transporting your pet to a 24-hour veterinary facility postoperatively. If you do not want to have your pet home in the first few days postoperatively, please advise your primary care veterinary staff. They will provide contact information for a local 24-hour veterinary facility and help get an estimate for the ongoing care.

It is important that you have proper expectations about this procedure; your experience and you pet's outcome will benefit greatly. Please discuss this information with your veterinarian when working through the decision-making process regarding **Elective Gastropexy**.

Lara Rasmussen, DVM, MS

Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Surgery
DIRECT VETERINARY SURGERY, LLC

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