



Intestinal foreign body in dogs and cats

1. What it is?

An intestinal foreign body means the pet has swallowed something that cannot pass normally through the gut. It becomes stuck (an obstruction), causing fluid and gas build-up and eventually pressure damage to the intestine.

Common objects:

Dogs: toys, balls, socks, corn cobs, bones, rocks, string/cloth

Cats: string/linear objects (thread, ribbon, yarn, hair ties) — especially dangerous

2. Why it is an emergency?

When the intestine is blocked, blood supply and movement stop.

This can lead to:

- Perforation (hole)
- Intestinal necrosis (death of tissue)
- Severe infection / sepsis
- Rapid dehydration/shock
- Linear foreign bodies (common in cats) can “saw” through the intestine, causing multiple perforations, which is why they are treated urgently.

3. Common warning signs?

- Vomiting (sometimes persistent)
- Not eating / nausea
- Lethargy
- Abdominal pain
- Diarrhoea or sometimes no stool
- Straining to defecate
- Weight loss (chronic partial blockage)
- “Play with string → suddenly sick” in cats
- If vomiting + anorexia lasts >24 hours → evaluation is strongly recommended.

4. Diagnosis

Tool	Purpose
Abdominal X-rays	Check for gas patterns, obstruction signs
Ultrasound	Very helpful to confirm obstruction and location
Contrast study (less often now)	Used in unclear cases or when an experienced ultrasonographer cannot assess the patient
Bloodwork	Assess hydration & organ stress

Foreign body is often confirmed during surgery (exploratory laparotomy) when imaging strongly suggests obstruction.



5. Treatment — when is surgery needed?

Scenario	Dogs	Cats
Vomiting + definite obstruction on imaging	Surgery recommended	Surgery recommended
Partial/early obstruction	Occasionally monitored briefly	Cats with string → never wait even though the obstruction might not be complete
Foreign body in stomach (not intestine)	Sometimes removed endoscopically	

Once it is in the intestine, surgery = standard of care.

6. Types of surgery

Procedure	What it means	When used
Enterotomy	Opening the intestine and removing object	Object stuck but intestine still healthy
Enterectomy = Resection & anastomosis	Removing a damaged/necrotic section of intestine, then reconnecting	If bowel is compromised or perforated
Gastrotomy	Opening stomach	If object still in stomach

7. Prognosis & survival

Situation	Expected outcome
Early surgery, healthy bowel	Excellent (90–98% survival)
Delayed presentation / necrotic bowel	Good but more guarded (~80–90%)
Multiple perforations / sepsis	Significantly worse (50–70% depending on severity)
Cats with linear/string FB treated quickly	Very good
Cats with delayed/perforated gut	Risk higher but many still recover if treated aggressively



8. Complication rates

Complication	Frequency (approx..)	Notes
Wound complications	~5–10%	Usually minor
Ileus (slow gut motility)	~10–20% early post-op	
Leakage from intestinal incision line	2–10%	Higher if gut was already compromised
Sepsis/peritonitis	Up to 20–30% if perforation present before surgery	
Re-obstruction later	Rare if pet-proofing done; some dogs are repeat offenders	

! Leakage risk increases when **dead bowel** had to be removed or patient was **very sick before surgery**!

9. Aftercare

- Hospitalisation for fluids, pain control, and monitoring
- Gradual reintroduction of food (often within 12–24 hrs post-op)
- Soft diet for 5–10 days
- E-collar so they can't chew stitches
- Rest + no scavenging
- Strict "no string / no toys unsupervised" for cats
- Full recovery usually 7–14 days, depending on severity.

10. Prevention tips

- Keep socks, underwear, toys, and corn cobs away from dogs
- Prevent scavenging & bin-raiding
- Keep yarn/thread/ribbon/hair ties away from cats
- Never allow cats to play with string unsupervised
- Immediate vet visit if a cat is seen swallowing string

11. Key takeaways

- Intestinal foreign bodies are time-sensitive emergencies
- Early surgery = best outcome
- Dogs most often swallow solid objects
- Cats most often swallow string/linear items → higher risk of perforation
- Survival is very high (90%+) when treated before perforation
- Surgery is usually straightforward when caught early
- Delay is what turns a routine case into a dangerous one

Selected English-language veterinary references

1. Hall EJ & Willard MD. Gastrointestinal Emergencies in Small Animals.
2. Fossum TW. Small Animal Surgery – foreign body obstruction & enterotomy outcomes
3. Cornell & Colorado State University surgical guidelines – intestinal FB prognosis
4. Ellison GW. Complications of intestinal surgery in dogs and cats. Vet Clin Small Anim
5. de la Puerta et al. 2021 – intestinal leakage risk factors in small animals