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Ask the Vet: The perils of using aspirin with animals

How could such a common medicine cause so much worry, so much confusion and, potentially, so much damage? Aspirin has been used to soothe the pain and fever affecting people for more than 100 years. Yet, we consider it to be a risky and dangerous drug to give to family pets.

I visited a local store recently and overheard a conversation between the proprietor and a customer. The two had been talking about their dogs.

I cringed as I heard the proprietor recommend that the customer should try giving her dog aspirin each day to soothe the dog's arthritis pain. The proprietor had been giving aspirin to her own dog for years.

Undoubtedly, the proprietor in this story was trying to be helpful. Did she have any idea what other medications her customer's dog was already taking? Did she have any idea whether the customer's dog has any kidney function compromise or bleeding tendencies?

I suspect she has no idea that aspirin use increases risks, including stomach ulceration, kidney damage and bleeding time increase.

In modern veterinary medicine, we address pain and inflammation problems in dogs and cats more aggressively and with better medications and techniques than ever before.

In fact, recognizing both the benefits of pain and inflammation relief and the serious potential side effects of aspirin and other old, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, which we call NSAIDs, has really pushed the development of safer and more effective NSAIDs.

Not only do we have more selective NSAIDs, but we also have protocols for the use of exercises and the use of combinations of multiple pain and inflammation-relieving medications (NSAIDs and non-NSAIDs).

These protocols significantly reduce the dose, frequency and duration of use for the pain medications, which in turn reduces the side-effect risks and improves the efficacy of the therapy.

Special features of select new NSAID medications include specificity for stimulating the receptors that act to reduce pain and inflammation.

A receptor is the part of the body where the medicine connects in order to stimulate an effect. This selective receptor stimulation greatly reduces stimulation of the receptors that act to slow blood clot formation and irritate the stomach lining, which can lead to ulcerations. Aspirin and other old NSAIDs are not receptor selective.

Over the last two decades, a greater understanding of the importance of blood and urine test monitoring for dogs and cats has developed.

The recommended frequency of performing blood and urine tests is usually every six months for pets that take long-term medications, but may be more frequent depending on a pet's health condition and the test results.

One blood and urine profile provides a snapshot view of results; whereas, the comparison of profile results over months and years provides much more useful trend information about the pet's health.

This information provides guidance in choosing diets and medications that are likely to be helpful and not harmful.

New NSAIDs are a great aid for helping cats and dogs heal faster and feel better. Knowledgeable and purposeful use with monitoring is important to minimize risks for very serious side effects.

When your pet seems uncomfortable, please consult with your veterinarian for compassionate and reliable advice.

Your questions are encouraged and help your veterinarian to better understand what needs to be explained so that your pet will benefit the most from the prescribed therapy.