

Ask the Vet: A Clear Message about Chew Toys

By Nancy Irvine, DVM – Daisy Hill Animal Hospital, Ltd.

Many Ashland community members will remember my father, Dr. Jack Irvine, who served our community as a family doctor for many years. Patients of his also may remember hearing advice to stop smoking, eat healthy foods, exercise and lose weight with no sugar coating attached to the message.

I do not remember any sugar coating attached when my father offered parental advice either. He still makes his points pretty clearly today.

Despite how adamantly my father warned against the dangers of smoking, he also explained to me that he and his mother had given his father cigars as a holiday gift in the 1930s. He used this story to explain how information and knowledge changes behavior, as well as one's point of view. At the time, they simply did not know the dangers of smoking. I am using his example in like fashion.

Just as my father had once viewed cigars as a gift, many years ago I considered a large, cooked, bovine knuckle bone to be a desirable chewing toy for dogs. Knowledge and experience taught people about the health hazards caused by smoking -- and, fortunately, long before I met him, my grandfather stopped smoking the cigars because of the recognized health concerns.

New information and experience also have taught me and other veterinarians about the health hazards and risks for dogs who chew bones or other hard objects.

The most common cause for tooth damage in dogs is chewing or biting a hard object. Dogs should not have access to ice cubes, real bones, rolled rawhides that are shaped like bones or rings, or chew toys that are harder than a blue Kong toy. If you are not familiar with a blue Kong toy, then you are welcome to visit my office, where a team member will be happy to show you one.

Chew toys, fetching toys and balls should be relatively light-weight for the dog's size and should have the same flex, bend and squeezable qualities of the blue Kong.

If your dog can chew rawhide without getting sick as some do, then offer only flat sheet forms of U.S.A. rawhide that will flex easily. If ice is offered to your dog during hot weather or illness, it should be thoroughly crushed like snow-cone ice. Ice, like bone, is just too hard.

Real bones should never be offered. The list of health dangers from chewing or eating real bones includes tooth fracture, tooth root damage from impact, stomach or intestinal obstruction or perforation and diarrhea.

Years ago, I treated a dog with a piece of bone lodged tightly against the roof of his mouth between his upper right and left rows of teeth. Under the piece of bone, the gingival tissue was dead and sloughing. The dog's owners had noticed the very foul odor from the infection, but they could not see anything in the dog's mouth.

They were perplexed, because the dog was still eating his meals. Most dogs and cats who have severe and painful tooth disease and/or jaw bone disease continue to eat. If a pet is eating, you cannot conclude that mouth pain or disease is not present. The mouth must be examined more closely to identify disease.

When a message is so very important, no sugar coating is appropriate. Maybe you have been offering your dog items to chew that are too hard and too dangerous. Likewise, my father's parents changed their way of thinking about cigars, and I changed my way of thinking about having dogs chew on big knuckle bones. I hope you put the power of new information to use in helping your pet live a comfortable and healthy life.

