

ACCES for Pet Health

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Repeat Testing: Why it helps diagnose and treat symptoms

By Beth Guerra, DVM



One question I often get asked is, "Why do I need to repeat these tests when we already know what disease my pet has?" This scenario is not uncommon at all when dealing with many of our patients and owners. The patient may have a history of asthma, inflammatory bowel disease, or recurrent urinary tract infections, etc. Or they may have just been evaluated at another clinic for the same problem and diagnostics found no abnormalities. It is very important to stress that both exams and diagnostic testing are a picture in time, and that situations can change quickly in many instances. Our veterinary patients cannot relay how they feel, or what they may have eaten, etc, and examinations one day may appear normal, but in 12-24 hours can differ significantly.

An example of this situation is a young, otherwise healthy dog that presents for vomiting. The exam may be normal and radiographs are taken that do not show any abnormalities. The patient is treated symptomatically, but presents 24 hours later for continued symptoms. Repeated radiographs are recommended, but the owner wonders why we would repeat the same test. However, serial radiographs often do help elucidate the cause of the symptoms, especially if an ingested foreign object has moved from the stomach where it may not be seen to being stuck in the intestines where it is now visible. I personally have experienced this scenario many times.



Diagnostic testing is an important tool in discovering the source of illness.

I also recall two patients that presented with respiratory difficulties with a known history of asthma. Repeat radiographs seemed excessive to the owners as the symptoms appeared to them to be similar to previous incidents. Symptomatic treatment was started but no response was seen. Chest radiographs were then taken. One cat had ingested a rock into its airway and required bronchoscopy to remove it. The other patient had a large esophageal foreign body that required endoscopy for removal of the foreign object. Repeated physical exams are also very important as an exam one day may significantly change by the next day. This may be a dog that one day appears normal on exam, but the following day is very painful in the abdomen. We also often encounter subtle changes in our hospitalized patients that are very significant. For instance, we may have a very ill cat on high volumes of fluids to keep them hydrated, but after a few days of care, begin to show an increase in the breathing rate and breathing effort. On further investigation, it may be found that the patient is no longer able to tolerate the level of fluid administration, or may have other underlying disease such as a heart problem.



In general, we try to emphasize that serial exams are one of the most important and simple diagnostics we have to our disposal and if the exam or history does not clarify the problem at hand, then diagnostics are indicated. Working in an emergency and referral facility we do tend to discover and see the atypical, however, we may not find the "zebra's in the herd "if we don't look for them.

Posted by [Christina Ryan](#) at September 23, 2010 11:46 a.m.

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