7 Tips for Talking to Clients About Their Pet's Gut Health

Clear conversations can position digestive care as an integral part of overall well-being.

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Gastrointestinal (GI) disease is one of the most common reasons pets are brought in for veterinary care, according to a 2024 study published in the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association. But conversations about gut health often focus narrowly on the immediate complaint — vomiting or diarrhea — rather than the bigger picture of long-term digestive wellness. As our understanding of the gut microbiome expands, veterinarians are expected to communicate this complexity to their clients. For effective conversations, the veterinary team must translate complex GI science into clear, actionable terms.

The following tips provide a practical framework for discussing gut health with clients and translating emerging knowledge about the intestinal microbiome into meaningful clinical recommendations.

1 Connect Gut Health to the Whole Patient

When a patient presents with a gastrointestinal issue, it can be tempting to address only the current problem. However, by explaining why GI health matters, you can provide context for subsequent recommendations and help your client understand that gut health isn't only about preventing diarrhea or resolving a vomiting episode.

The gastrointestinal tract plays central roles in digestion and nutrient absorption and is closely associated with the immune system.[1] The gut also interacts with other physiologic systems through complex connections that researchers continue to investigate. This broader perspective can help clients understand why factors such as diet, medications, disease, and changes in the intestinal microbiome may be relevant when evaluating a pet with GI concerns.

For a healthy pet, the focus may be on maintaining an appropriate diet, avoiding unnecessary dietary disruption, and recognizing early changes in gastrointestinal function. For a patient with recurrent diarrhea, chronic enteropathy, or another gastrointestinal disorder, the discussion may expand to include dietary management, potential dysbiosis, and whether microbiome-directed interventions may be recommended.

2 Explain Dysbiosis in Plain Language

The gut microbiome is a complex community of microorganisms that normally exists in a symbiotic relationship with the animal. The microbiome contributes to digestion and metabolism, interacts with the immune system, and helps protect the intestinal tract from pathogen invasion and colonization. When this healthy relationship is maintained, the condition is known as eubiosis. When the microbial community's composition or function is disrupted, dysbiosis occurs.

When deciding on a treatment plan for a patient, it's important to consider dysbiosis as part of the problem, but the terminology may be difficult for clients to understand. In simple terms, explain how diet, medications, illness, stress, and environmental changes can disrupt the community of microorganisms living in the gut, potentially altering which are present and what they produce. However, don't oversimplify dysbiosis as an imbalance between "good" and "bad" bacteria. The microbiome is much more complex, and the same microorganisms may have different effects depending on the host's health and the surrounding microbial environment. In pets, dysbiosis is frequently associated with GI disease, but it can be difficult to determine whether the dysbiosis contributed to the disease or resulted from it.

3 Discuss Probiotics and Prebiotics as Preventive Care

Clients often associate probiotics with treating an existing GI problem, but wellness visits offer an opportunity to broaden the conversation and identify when proactive microbiome support may be appropriate. Rather than waiting until a pet develops GI signs, veterinary teams can discuss whether probiotics, prebiotics, or a combination may help when a known stressor or disruption is upcoming.

Situations such as boarding, travel, diet changes, and antibiotic therapy can alter the intestinal environment or affect the gut microbiome, potentially contributing to GI disturbances in some patients. For pets with a history of stress-related diarrhea or GI upset during these events, discussing microbiome support before the anticipated stressor may be particularly relevant.

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It's also useful to explain that probiotics and prebiotics support the microbiome in different ways. Probiotics introduce specific live microorganisms, while prebiotics provide nutrition for microorganisms already present in the gut. Intestinal bacteria can ferment prebiotic fibers and produce short-chain fatty acids and other metabolites that support intestinal function.[2]

Proactive conversations can shift microbiome support from an impulse purchase made after symptoms appear to a more thoughtful component of an individualized GI health plan.

4 Explain That Probiotics Aren't a Cure-All

When a pet develops a GI disorder, clients may see probiotics as an easy fix. Veterinary teams can set more realistic expectations by explaining that probiotics aren't a universal treatment for GI disease. Their potential benefits are more specific to certain conditions, probiotic strains, and patient populations, and they should be considered as part of an overall treatment plan.

The strongest evidence for probiotic use is in dogs with acute uncomplicated diarrhea, where certain products have been shown to hasten the return to normal stools and may reduce

The Gut-Brain Connection

The diverse community of bacteria, protozoa, and fungi in the GI tract interacts with the immune, metabolic, endocrine, and nervous systems, creating a complex gut-brain axis. The gut and brain communicate through multiple pathways, including the vagus nerve, immune signaling, and microbial metabolites. Some gut microorganisms produce or influence compounds involved in neurologic signaling, including serotonin, dopamine, and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA). Research in lab animals has shown that the microbiome affects brain development and behavior, while studies in dogs are beginning to explore potential relationships between the microbiome, cognition, and behavior.



What does this mean for the veterinary conversation?

The gut-brain connection provides another reason to consider GI health in the context of the whole patient. However, this association doesn't mean that modifying the microbiome will change a pet's behavior, so consider microbiome-directed interventions within the broader clinical picture.

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stress-associated diarrhea. Some probiotics have also demonstrated benefits in pets with conditions such as chronic enteropathy, constipation, acute hemorrhagic diarrhea syndrome, and idiopathic megacolon.[3] These findings can help veterinary teams explain why a probiotic may be useful while emphasizing that it doesn't replace appropriate diagnostic evaluation, dietary management, or supportive care.

5 Explain the Risks of Unnecessary Antibiotics

Clients may expect an antibiotic when their pet has a GI problem, but antibiotics are rarely indicated for canine and feline GI disease. As understanding of the intestinal microbiome has grown, so has recognition that antibiotics can cause substantial and prolonged disruption to the microbial community.[3]

Antibiotic use also contributes to antimicrobial resistance, creating consequences for animal and human health.[3] This makes antimicrobial stewardship particularly relevant when discussing pet gut health.

When an antibiotic isn't prescribed, frame the decision as an intentional part of the treatment plan so clients understand that avoiding an unnecessary antibiotic is an active clinical choice, not a decision to leave their pet untreated.

6 Position a Therapeutic Diet as Treatment

Clients may question the cost of a prescription diet or assume an over-the-counter food can provide the same benefits. To counter this, veterinary teams can explain that therapeutic diets are formulated to address specific nutritional and physiologic needs associated with particular diseases.

For patients with gastrointestinal disease, the appropriate diet may help manage digestibility, fat content, fiber, protein sources, or other nutritional factors that influence gastrointestinal function. Explain that these diets leverage nutrition to help manage their pet's underlying disease.

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This distinction is especially important when discussing chronic conditions, where dietary management is a cornerstone of treatment. An over-the-counter food may contain similar ingredients but doesn't necessarily provide the same formulation, nutrient profile, or consistency as a diet designed and tested for a specific therapeutic purpose.

7 Introduce the Idea of Fecal Microbiota Transplantation

For pets with chronic or refractory GI disease, fecal microbiota transplantation (FMT) may be an option when conventional approaches don't provide adequate results.[4] Because the concept can be unfamiliar or off-putting to clients, veterinary teams should explain FMT in straightforward terms and put it in the context of the individual patient.

Describe FMT as a procedure that transfers beneficial microorganisms from a screened donor to help restore a more functional microbiome. Explain that significant or persistent dysbiosis may be difficult to address with a single probiotic, and FMT introduces a broader community of microorganisms. Also ensure your client understands that the procedure is not a guaranteed cure.

Gut health is an important part of the broader conversation about preventive care and GI disease, but every case is unique and requires an individualized approach. By helping clients understand the role of nutrition and the microbiome, recognizing when dysbiosis may be relevant, and choosing probiotics, therapeutic diets, or other microbiome-directed therapies, veterinary teams can translate emerging microbiome research into practical patient care.

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Which Products Should Pet Owners Choose?

With so many prebiotics and probiotics marketed for dogs and cats, clients may understandably be confused about which product to buy. If a pet owner asks for your advice, explain what makes a prebiotic or probiotic worth considering:

- **Start with the pet:** The right approach depends on why you're recommending prebiotics and probiotics, the pet's health status, current diet and medications, and whether evidence supports their use for a particular situation.
- **Look beyond the label:** For probiotics, look for products that clearly identify the microorganisms, the specific strains they contain, viable organism counts, and appropriate storage instructions. For prebiotics, consider the type and amount of fiber provided. Also ensure the selected prebiotic or probiotic is species-appropriate.
- **Focus on the evidence:** When possible, choose products with research supporting their use in dogs or cats, ideally for the condition or goal being addressed.
- **Set expectations:** Microbiome-supporting products can support gastrointestinal health in some situations, but they are not a substitute for diagnosing and treating underlying disease. Ensure dog and cat owners understand that they should prioritize veterinary evaluation over trying different prebiotic and probiotic supplements.

SOURCES

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1. **Which statement best describes an appropriate approach to discussing probiotics with a client?**
   a. All probiotics provide are the same, so brand selection is the main concern.
   b. Probiotics should be recommended routinely for every healthy dog and cat.
   c. Probiotic recommendations should consider the pet's condition, species, and evidence supporting the specific strain or formulation.
   d. A probiotic can be used instead of diagnosing and treating a GI disorder.

2. **A dog with a history of recurrent diarrhea comes in for a wellness check, and the owner mentions an upcoming boarding stay. Which approach is the most appropriate?**
   a. Wait until diarrhea develops before discussing intervention.
   b. Consider proactive microbiome support before boarding.
   c. Recommend changing the dog's diet to one marketed for digestive health.
   d. Explain that probiotics are only helpful for dogs with chronic GI disease.

3. **Which statement best explains dysbiosis to a pet owner?**
   a. Dysbiosis occurs when the composition or function of the gut microbial community is disrupted.
   b. Dysbiosis occurs when harmful bacteria completely replace beneficial bacteria in the gut.
   c. Dysbiosis is a bacterial infection that requires antibiotic treatment.
   d. Dysbiosis is diagnosed when a pet is vomiting or has diarrhea.

4. **If a client questions why their dog with chronic GI disease needs a therapeutic diet, which response is most appropriate?**
   a "Prescription diets are always more healthy than over-the-counter diets."
   b. "The therapeutic diet is formulated to address specific nutritional and physiologic needs associated with your pet's condition."
   c. "Over-the-counter foods should never be used for dogs with GI disease."
   d. "The main advantage of this diet is that it contains more probiotics."

5. **A dog has chronic, refractory GI disease despite appropriate conventional management. The veterinarian is considering FMT. Which statement is most appropriate when discussing this with the client?**
   a. FMT eliminates the need to address diet or the underlying cause of the GI disease.
   b. FMT provides a guaranteed gut microbiome reset and should resolve the underlying disease.
   c. FMT is appropriate for chronic GI disorders once a probiotic has failed.
   d. FMT introduces a broader community of microorganisms and may be considered in select cases, but it is not a guaranteed cure.