



MEGAESOPHAGUS

ABOUT THE DISEASE

Normal Esophagus Function:

Thin muscle tube from mouth to stomach (through chest cavity). Uses rhythmic contractions (peristalsis) to push food/water down.

Disease Process:

Esophagus loses motility—either generalized (nerve issues) or focal (obstruction). Results in dilation, food/water backup, and high risk of **aspiration pneumonia** (inhaling contents into lungs).

Causes by Age:

- **Congenital (puppies/kittens):** Vascular ring anomalies, poor nerve development, birth defects.
- **Acquired (adults):** Autoimmune/metabolic (myasthenia gravis, hypothyroidism, Addison's), esophagitis/strictures from reflux.
- **Idiopathic (any age):** Most common—cause unknown after ruling out others.

Key Symptoms:

- Regurgitation (passive, unlike vomiting).
- Coughing, nasal discharge, respiratory distress.
- Failure to thrive/grow.

OBTAINING A DIAGNOSIS

Physical Exam & History:

Signs of aspiration pneumonia (e.g., fever, harsh lung sounds). Key clue: **Regurgitation** (passive undigested food/fluid from mouth soon after eating) vs. **vomiting** (active retching from stomach contents).

Primary Imaging:

Chest X-ray (radiograph): Gold standard, non-invasive—spots dilated esophagus and pneumonia. Barium contrast swallow (X-ray series) if needed to highlight dilation.

Advanced Tests:

- Endoscopy: Camera exam for confirmation/obstructions.
- Bloodwork/other: Rule out underlying causes (e.g., metabolic like hypothyroidism).
- Referral: For specialized tests if unclear.

TREATMENT

Address/treat identifiable issues first (e.g., meds for myasthenia gravis or hypothyroidism)—improves outcomes if possible.

Idiopathic (No Known Cause):

No cure; focus on managing complications like aspiration pneumonia (antibiotics), weight loss (nutrition), and regurgitation.

Key Management Strategies:

- **Diet:** Switch to gruel (moistened/blended food) for easier passage.
- **Positioning:** Feed elevated to shoulder height—uses gravity to help food reach stomach.
- **Bailey Chair:** Special upright sling (like for humans)—keeps pet vertical 10-30 min post-meal; popular for dogs.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

- Rule out any other conditions to potentially lessen the effects of megaesophagus.