

When last we spoke, we were discussing whether or not to feed human foods to our companions. I pointed out that I feel it is best to stick to foods specifically formulated for your companion be they canine, feline, avian, lagomorph(rabbits e.g.), or rodent. In other words, these creatures we choose to take care of and share our lives with have specific nutritional needs and it is very difficult to match these needs by randomly feeding human foods. Simply supplementing with human foods is a very common practice that is also not a great idea. There are potential problems ranging from obesity and all its associated problems, increased risk for dental disease and the list goes on. As I also promised last week, I would like to share with you a case I had some years back, a tragic case concerning Frosty the 8 year old Samoyed dog.

Frosty was the only “child” of his caretakers Nancy and David. He lived a very relaxing life allowed to be anywhere his caretakers were and spending his nights sharing their bedroom. He was feed a high quality dog food twice daily and was truly loved by his people. It had become habit over the years for his people to feed him from their table during their dinner whatever the food may be. It was common practice for them to scrap whatever was left on their plates into his bowl, which he always anticipated and enjoyed.

On Christmas Eve in 1993 Nancy and David prepared a lavish dinner with a standing rib roast as the main course. Being in the Christmas spirit of sharing and giving, Frosty was given a nice piece of prime rib. Within a few hours, he was noted by his caretakers to be quite gassy and then began with profuse almost liquid diarrhea. Later on that evening, he began to vomit and continued through the night with both diarrhea and vomiting. Christmas morning I saw Frosty in quite a debilitated state. He was very depressed and very dehydrated from all the vomiting and diarrhea to the point where he could no longer hold his head up for more that a few seconds.

I explained to Nancy and David that Frosty was suffering from severe gastroenteritis and would need to be hospitalized for treatment of his dehydration and diagnostics to try to discover the underlying cause for his severe condition. We started him on intravenous fluids and took a blood sample along with some radiographs of his abdomen to try to figure out what was happening. The radiographs showed an extremely irritated stomach and intestine and the blood work revealed the cause. Frosty had severe pancreatitis.

Pancreatitis is a disease involving inflammation of the pancreas. In fact any time you see the suffix “itis” it means “inflammation of”. Gastroenteritis as used earlier refers to inflammation of the stomach and intestine. In this case, it was secondary to the pancreatitis. The pancreas is the organ responsible for producing the enzymes that digest food and make the nutrients within the food available for the body. The pancreas makes insulin which is responsible for moving glucose, the sugar that is the body’s premier energy source, into the cells. The pancreas also makes an enzyme called lipase which is used by the body to digest fat and breaking it down to provide energy and to store for later use. When the pancreas becomes inflamed (pancreatitis), digestion is effected and gastroenteritis ensues.

There are degrees of pancreatitis ranging from mild to severe depending on how much damage is done. Mild pancreatitis may result in just a bit of nausea making the dog subdued with perhaps a small amount of diarrhea and/or vomiting. When the disease is severe, it can be fatal. The pancreas will over secrete enzymes that will actually begin to digest itself and the tissue around it including the intestine. Once this process begins, it becomes rapidly destructive. Even with early aggressive medical therapy, it can be fatal. Unfortunately, this was the case for Frosty.

Frosty continued to vomit and have diarrhea, both of which became quite bloody. Within 24 hours after hospitalization, Frosty passed away. We were all devastated especially David and Nancy. Certainly, if they would have known better, they would never have fed the meat to Frosty.

I realize this is a dramatic example of the dangers of feeding human foods to our companions. There are many incidences where human foods including meat, are fed to dogs without an apparent problem but please realize as this tragic example illustrates, there is a potential risk. You as your companions caretaker, need to decide if it is a risk worth taking.

If you simply cannot resist your companion, consider treats that are low in fat and simple carbohydrates (sugars) such as vegetables. Many dogs will go for baby carrots especially if they think you like them. Use your best marketing techniques to sell them on these carrots and they will be the better for it. As for those of you allowed by cats to have them as companions, stick with a high quality cat food. I’ve not known a self respecting cat yet who will jump for joy over a carrot.