



# Peak Veterinary Specialists

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## CHOLANGIOHEPATITIS

### WHAT IS CHOLANGIOHEPATITIS?

The word cholangiohepatitis breaks down into “chol” (bile), “angio” (vessel), “hepat” (liver) and “itis” (inflammation). Putting this all together means inflammation of the liver and the bile ducts. The inflammation can be caused by bacterial infections or an imbalance in immune system function.

Bile is a greenish material the liver makes to aid in digestion and absorption of nutrients. Bile is transported to the gallbladder via small bile ducts. The gallbladder stores bile. When the appropriate hormonal signals are present, the gall bladder contracts and empties bile into the small intestine via one very large duct called the common bile duct.

### DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis of cholangiohepatitis is made based on a combination of clinical signs, lab results, x-rays, abdominal ultrasound findings, and liver biopsy. A patient with cholangiohepatitis usually has a poor or no appetite, vomiting, lethargy, and often is jaundiced (yellow coloration of the skin and gums). Blood work may indicate mild anemia, increased liver enzymes and bilirubin, and bilirubin in the urine. Sometimes an increased white blood cell count is noted. The liver is often enlarged and can be felt with abdominal palpation and confirmed with x-rays and ultrasound. A liver biopsy is the definitive diagnostic test. By looking at liver tissue microscopically, the pathologist can confirm cholangiohepatitis and rule out cancer or other liver diseases. A culture of the liver tissue can tell us if a bacterial infection is the cause and what antibiotics are most appropriate.

### TREATMENT

The pet with liver disease may require hospitalization, fluid therapy, and nutritional support regardless of the cause of liver disease.

- **Antibiotics:** Antibiotics may be prescribed if a bacterial infection is thought to be the cause of the cholangiohepatitis or to prevent infection in an already sick liver.
- **Choleretics:** A choleretic is a medication that makes bile more liquid so that it can flow smoothly without sludging. Flow of bile in the proper direction helps by removing the toxins the liver is trying to excrete in bile but also helps prevent bacteria from “swimming upstream” towards the liver tissue. The chief choleretic prescribed for animals is called ursodiol.
- **SAMe:** SAMe is a nutritional supplement or “nutriceutical”. SAMe stands for S-adenosylmethionine. It is an antioxidant, protecting the sick liver cells from the toxins they have absorbed and normally would be excreting in bile.
- **Silymarin:** This is the active ingredient in the herbal medication commonly known as “milk thistle.” It has been shown to be protective to the liver in Amanita mushroom poisoning and it can be protective to the liver in other toxic or bacterial scenarios.

- **Immune suppression:** Immune suppression is the cornerstone of therapy for non-bacterial cholangiohepatitis. Immune suppression is needed to relieve the inflammation inherent to cholangiohepatitis. Typical medications include prednisone or prednisolone.

### **ASSOCIATED CONDITIONS**

Cholangiohepatitis often occurs with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) and pancreatitis in cats. This condition is called “triaditis”. Toxoplasmosis is a parasitic infection associated with this condition in cats. Toxoplasmosis can be treated with the medication clindamycin.

### **PROGNOSIS**

The prognosis for cats and dogs with cholangiohepatitis is generally fair to good.