

Be Observant: Your Dog's Poop Can Foretell Health Troubles

Gain insight by taking a moment to see what's left behind when your dog poops. Indiscriminate eating can trigger diarrhea, but so can pancreatitis, life-threatening intestinal perforations and tumors. For healthy pets with diarrhea, please ignore this commonly dished out food advice.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Occasional episodes of diarrhea are to be expected if you have a dog in the family
- There are many potential causes of diarrhea in dogs, but the most common is dietary indiscretion
- Diarrhea comes in many forms, and you can sometimes tell the cause by the appearance of the stool
- Diarrhea symptoms include not only explosive loose, watery stools, but also hunching and straining that looks more like constipation than the opposite
- Home care for a bout of diarrhea in an otherwise healthy dog can include a short-term fast, followed by a bland diet

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If you're a dog parent, I'm sure you're aware that occasional episodes of diarrhea simply go with the territory. It's never a matter of if your dog will have diarrhea — only when. In fact, anticipating the random loose stool and knowing how to manage the situation when it happens is just part of being a prepared dog parent!

Causes of Diarrhea

Diarrhea in dogs can have many potential causes, from benign to very serious, including:

- Indiscriminate eating
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency
- Change in diet
- Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)
- Tumors
- Food intolerance, sensitivity or allergy
- Intestinal obstruction
- Lymphangiectasia

- Intestinal parasites (e.g., giardia)
- Ingestion of toxins
- Histiocytic ulcerative colitis
- Bacterial infection
- Rectal polyps
- Idiopathic hemorrhagic gastroenteritis
- Viral infection
- Small intestine bacterial overgrowth (SIBO)
- Histoplasma enteritis or colitis

By far, the most common cause of diarrhea in otherwise healthy dogs is indiscriminate eating (e.g., sticks, rocks, toys, socks, etc.)

Types of Dog Diarrhea

In the following situations, unless the problem clears up on its own within a day or so, I recommend making an appointment with your veterinarian:

- A soft stool with no visible blood or mucus might indicate either a dietary change or indiscriminate eating. However, it can also signal the presence of an intestinal parasite such as giardia.
- A greasy-looking gray stool can be a sign of too much fat in your dog's diet, which can trigger pancreatitis — inflammation of the pancreas that can range from very mild to life-threatening.
- A black, tarry stool typically indicates the presence of old blood somewhere in the dog's digestive system. It can be a sign of injury to the GI tract from indiscriminate eating, and it can also be a sign of a very serious disease such as cancer.
- Watery diarrhea can be a sign of stress or a viral (e.g., parvovirus) or parasitic infection and can lead very quickly to dehydration, especially in puppies.
- A soft stool containing or coated with mucus may indicate the presence of parvovirus or parasites.
- A soft or watery stool with visible worms, eggs or other uninvited guests is a clear indication of a parasite infestation.
- Firm, soft or runny poop containing blood or blood clots is almost always a sign of a serious health problem requiring immediate attention. Fresh blood indicates current bleeding, typically from the large intestine or the anus or anal glands. There could be a perforation of the intestinal wall from something the dog ingested, or from the eruption of a tumor or ulcer.

Common and Not-so-Common Diarrhea Symptoms

Diarrhea symptoms can be quite varied. Frequency, urgency and loose watery stools are the classic signs, but actually, so is straining. Many dog parents mistake constipation for diarrhea because they see the dog hunched up outside and nothing much seems to be happening.

What looks like constipation in this case is really just another sign the pet is having a bout of diarrhea. Diarrhea upsets the normal rhythmic contractions and sensations of the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, causing your dog to feel the constant need to eliminate. So, if you see your dog hunched up outside, check around for loose, brown or watery stools. If you find any, she's more likely to have diarrhea than constipation.

Other symptoms that can go along with diarrhea include lethargy, loss of appetite, fever and dehydration. Typically, young, healthy dogs have a single episode of loose stool or diarrhea, and it's done. However, if your dog is having chronic bouts of diarrhea, she runs the risk of becoming debilitated and ill.

Puppies, small breeds and older dogs are at high risk of becoming dehydrated from even a single episode of diarrhea. If your dog seems fine and healthy after a bout of diarrhea, it's safe to simply keep a careful eye on her. But if you notice any lethargy, a fever, or a change in behavior, you should call your veterinarian.

If your dog seems fine otherwise but is having recurring episodes of diarrhea that don't seem to be resolving, or episodes that last more than three days, it's also time to call the vet for an appointment. And needless to say, if she's passing blood in her stool or you notice any weakness or other signs of debilitation along with diarrhea, it's important to get her to the vet immediately.

Treating a Pet With Diarrhea at Home

If your dog is otherwise healthy and his behavior is normal, my recommendation is to withhold food — not water, just food — for 12 hours. A short-term fast gives the GI tract a chance to rest, repair and restore itself.

Follow the 12-hour food fast with a bland diet. I recommend cooked, fat-free, ground turkey and 100% canned pumpkin. If canned pumpkin isn't available, you can use fresh, steamed pumpkin. If you can't use either one of those, you can use cooked sweet potato or even cooked white potato.

Many veterinarians still recommend a bland diet of ground beef and rice. I don't agree. Even the leanest ground beef is high in fat, which can worsen GI upset, and boiling it doesn't substantially decrease the fat content. That's why I recommend fat-free meat for bland diets.

Rice is a very starchy carbohydrate that tends to ferment in the GI tract and also provides a food source for opportunistic bacteria. Rice also often zips right through the digestive system and exits your dog's body looking just like it did going in. This tells you it hasn't provided much in the way of calories or nutrition.

Canned 100% pumpkin provides about 80 calories and 7 grams of soluble fiber per cup, compared to 1.2 grams of fiber in a cup of cooked white rice. The soluble fiber in pumpkin coats and soothes the GI tract; it also delays gastric emptying, slowing down GI transit times and helping to reverse the effects of increased peristalsis (muscle contractions).

When animals have diarrhea, they can lose important electrolytes, including potassium, which puts them at risk of dehydration. Hypokalemia, or low potassium levels, can result in cramping, fatigue, weakness and heart rate irregularities. Pumpkin happens to be an excellent source of potassium, with 505 milligrams of naturally occurring potassium per cup. Pumpkin is also safer for diabetic pets than rice. And most animals love it (including cats).

Since dogs don't have a nutritional requirement for grain, feeding a pro-inflammatory food like rice when they're already having GI upset is counter-intuitive. There's also the issue of arsenic in rice. Mix the turkey and pumpkin, 50/50, and feed it to your pet until the diarrhea resolves. If it doesn't clear up in about three days on a bland diet, it's time to call your veterinarian.

Additional Treatment Suggestions

I also recommend keeping some slippery elm on hand. Slippery elm is a neutral fiber source that works really well to ease episodes of diarrhea. I call it "nature's Pepto-Bismol" because it reduces GI inflammation and acts as a non-irritating source of fiber to bulk up the stool and slow down GI transit time.

Give your dog about a half a teaspoon or a capsule for each 10 pounds of body weight with every bland meal. I also recommend adding in a **good-quality probiotic** once the stool starts to firm up.

In addition to slippery elm and probiotics, many pet parents have good luck with herbs such as peppermint, fennel or chamomile. These are especially helpful for the cramping and other uncomfortable GI symptoms that come with diarrhea. There are several homeopathic remedies that can be very beneficial for intermittent diarrhea depending on your dog's specific symptoms, including nux vomica, veratrum, podophyllum, arsenicum album and china officinalis.

Sources and References

[PetMD](#)
