

When Your Dog's Panting Might Mean Trouble

Panting helps regulate body temperature and is your dog's way of sweating. But, abnormal panting may be a sign that something is wrong. Four ways to tell if your pet's panting is normal and 8 things that abnormal panting may be signaling.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Panting is normal in otherwise healthy dogs who pant to regulate their body temperature
- Abnormal panting can be a sign of illness or emotional distress
- There are many causes of abnormal panting, some of which include heatstroke, pain, Cushing's disease, and anxiety or phobias

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published November 25, 2015.

If you've spent any time around dogs, you know they pant. In fact, many dogs pant a lot. Panting describes a type of rapid, shallow breathing that speeds evaporation of water from your dog's tongue, and inside his mouth and upper respiratory tract. As the water evaporates, it helps your dog regulate his body temperature.

This is necessary because as his body temp rises, his skin doesn't sweat like a human's does. He's able to sweat a bit through his paw pads, but it's panting that allows him to circulate air through his body most efficiently.

The normal (non-panting) breathing rate for dogs is 30 to 40 inhalations and exhalations per minute, but a panting dog can take 10 times that many breaths per minute (300 to 400). You would think panting uses up a lot of energy, but it actually doesn't require much effort thanks to the natural elasticity of the lungs and airways.

Normal and Abnormal Panting

There are two types of panting: normal and abnormal. Normal panting typically occurs when your dog's body is overheating and is considered a natural, healthy response. Abnormal panting, on the other hand, may be a sign that your dog has a physical or emotional issue that needs further investigation.

You can tell the difference between the two types of panting by looking for these signs:

- Abnormal panting is excessive compared to your dog's normal panting behavior
- It occurs during times when your dog isn't overly warm and doesn't need to cool her body down
- It doesn't sound quite like normal panting — it may be louder or harsher, for example
- Your dog is exerting more effort than normal while panting

If your dog suddenly starts panting at inappropriate times or the panting seems heavier than usual, you should be concerned, but there's no need to panic. Make an appointment with your veterinarian to discuss your pet's symptoms and have him checked out.

Causes for Abnormal Panting

- **Overheating leading to heatstroke** — The more overheated a dog becomes, the heavier he will pant. Some of the other signs of overheating include excessive thirst, elevated body temperature, glazed eyes, bright or dark red tongue or gums, and increased pulse and heartbeat.

If your dog's body temperature gets to 109°F or higher, heatstroke is the result. The cells of the body rapidly start to die. The brain swells, causing seizures. Lack of blood supply to the GI tract causes ulcers. Dehydration leads to irreversible kidney damage. And all these catastrophic events take place within a matter of minutes.

It's important for pet owners to take every precaution to prevent overheating. By the time a dog is exhibiting symptoms of heatstroke, it's often too late to save him.

- **Breed predisposition** — Brachycephalic breeds, dogs with short or "pushed in" faces (e.g., Pugs, Boston Terriers, Boxers, and Bulldogs) tend to pant a lot because many have lifelong breathing difficulties. Due to the upper airway challenges suffered by these dogs, they often don't pant efficiently and are at significantly increased risk for heatstroke.

It's important to take precautions if your brachy has to travel by plane or even by car. A brachycephalic pet will have more difficulty in a hot vehicle than other pets.

If you have a brachy, it's important to be familiar with her normal breathing patterns so you can take quick action if the pattern changes. "Normal" for her isn't the same as it is for dogs with longer muzzles.

If you notice an increase, amplification, or some other change in your pet's respiratory sounds, it's important to take note of it.

- **Pain** — If your dog is feeling discomfort or is dealing with a painful condition, heavy or frequent panting can be one of the first signs of trouble. If your dog is panting for no discernible reason or at odd times, for example, at night when she's normally resting, you should make an appointment with your veterinarian.

Keep in mind that your canine companion can't tell you she's hurting, so it's up to you to notice changes in behavior that signal she could be in pain.

- **Diseases of the heart and lungs** — One of the symptoms of a heart condition such as dilated cardiomyopathy in dogs is excessive panting.

Other signs include reluctance or decreased ability to exercise, tiring quickly, increased respiration, and coughing. There may also be sudden episodes of weakness or fainting. Some dogs with heart disease have enlarged abdomens and heavy breathing due to fluid accumulation.

A diseased heart can't efficiently pump blood around the body, so the tissues become deprived of oxygen. Your dog's body will increase its rate of respiration to try to compensate for the lack of oxygen, and the result is panting.

As the heart's ability to pump declines, blood pressure in the veins behind the heart can increase. Congestion of the lungs and fluid accumulation are common, and when the lungs can no longer transfer oxygen to the bloodstream, oxygen deprivation causes the dog to breathe more rapidly and with greater force. The result is excessive panting.

- **Cushing's disease** — A dog with Cushing's disease, or hyperadrenocorticism, has adrenal glands that are releasing too much cortisol. Cortisol is a diverse hormone that in excessive amounts can create wide-ranging symptoms, one of the first of which is increased panting.

Other symptoms include increased thirst and urination, weight gain (often in spite of a reduction in calories), thinning skin, and a change in skin color from pink to grey or even black, bruising, hair loss, and irritability or restlessness.

- **Anemia** — When a dog has an abnormally low volume of red blood cells and insufficient hemoglobin to carry oxygen to the body's tissues, he experiences oxygen starvation. As in the case of heart and lung disease, one of the signs of oxygen deprivation is panting.

Other symptoms of anemia include weakness, lethargy, exercise intolerance, an elevated heart rate, pale mucous membranes (usually noticed in the mouth – the gums and/or tongue become pale pink to white), mental confusion, loss of appetite, rapid breathing, and collapse. If the animal is passing a large amount of digested blood from the GI tract, there will be a black tarry stool as well.

- **Laryngeal paralysis** — This is a disorder in which the muscles and cartilage that open and close the larynx malfunction. When a dog with the condition breathes in, the laryngeal cartilages do not open properly, making breathing difficult. Restricted airflow and loud, raspy panting is the result.
- **Anxiety, stress, fear, and phobias** — Dogs who are anxious, stressed, or have noise phobias often pant. This is considered "behavioral panting" and there are usually other signs of discomfort, for example, repetitive yawning, pacing, whining or crying, lip licking, trembling, hiding, and in extreme cases, loss of bladder or bowel control.

Short-term reactions to stressful or unfamiliar events allow your dog to prepare to fight or take flight if necessary, and are entirely normal. However, a chronic and prolonged fear response can cause both physical and emotional disorders that can potentially shorten your dog's life and negatively impact his quality of life.

If you notice abnormal panting in your dog, even if she seems fine otherwise, it's important to make an appointment with your veterinarian. As with all health conditions, the sooner the problem is diagnosed and treated if necessary, the better the outcome for your four-legged companion.

Sources and References

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