

Could Water Actually Be Harming Your Dog?

How your dog's love for water could end in tragedy: This deep dive into water intoxication will change the way you think about your dog's hydration and playtime.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- It doesn't happen often, but dogs — especially those who love being in water or playing with sprinklers or hoses — can develop water intoxication, which is a potentially fatal condition
- Water intoxication causes hyponatremia, a condition in which sodium levels drop to dangerously low levels; hyponatremia is a medical emergency, and even with aggressive veterinary care, many dogs don't survive, so it's important to take commonsense steps to avoid tragedy
- Signs of hyponatremia include lethargy, disorientation, and vomiting and/or diarrhea
- Hypernatremia, or saltwater poisoning, is another potentially fatal condition that can develop in canine companions who spend time at the beach consuming too much saltwater
- Symptoms of saltwater poisoning include increased thirst, vomiting, diarrhea, lethargy, disorientation, tremors, and seizures; if you suspect your dog has consumed too much saltwater, seek emergency veterinary care immediately

Most dog parents naturally only concern themselves with ensuring their pet always has plenty of water to drink, to prevent **dehydration**. But did you know that when it comes to dogs and water ingestion, “too much of a good thing” is a thing? Yes, it's actually possible for your canine BFF to consume too much water, and each year a small number of water-loving dogs get dangerously drunk on their favorite beverage.

If your pet enjoys being in the water, it's important to realize that especially with small dogs and those who love to retrieve toys from the water, it's very easy for them to swallow too much water to the point of intoxication. Dogs who swallow water from a lawn sprinkler or hose are also at risk.

Water intoxication can lead to a potentially fatal condition called hyponatremia, which is an excessively low blood sodium level. Hypernatremia (saltwater poisoning) results from ingesting too much saltwater.

Consuming excessive amounts of water dilutes bodily fluids, throwing off the electrolyte balance. It reduces sodium levels in fluid outside of cells (extracellular fluid). Sodium is necessary to maintain blood pressure and the function of muscles and nerves.

As the sodium level in extracellular fluid drops, the cells fill with water as the dog's body tries to balance sodium levels inside cells with falling levels outside cells. The water-filled cells, which include brain cells, start to expand. The central nervous system can also be impacted.

Symptoms and Treatment of Hyponatremia

Signs of hyponatremia in dogs include:

- Lethargy
- Vomiting/diarrhea
- Weakness
- Loss of appetite
- Incoordination
- **Seizures**
- Disorientation
- Coma
- Muscle twitching
- Death

Water intoxication progresses very quickly and can threaten your dog's life, so if he's been playing in water and begins to show one or more of the symptoms listed above, seek veterinary care immediately.

Treatment usually involves intravenous (IV) electrolytes, diuretics, and medications to reduce brain swelling. With aggressive veterinary care, some dogs do recover, but tragically, many do not.

Assessing Your Dog's Risk

Any dog can ingest too much water, but hyponatremia is most often seen in water-loving canines who spend hours at a stretch in the pond, pool, or lake; dogs that constantly lap up water or bite at it while they're swimming; and dogs who inadvertently swallow water as they dive for toys.

Other potential candidates are dogs that drink too much water during or after exercise or competition, and dogs who enjoy getting sprayed with water from a hose or sprinklers.

Due to their size, **small dogs** show signs of water intoxication more quickly than larger breeds because it doesn't take long for an excessive amount of water to accumulate in their bodies.

Avoiding Water Intoxication in Your Dog

There are several commonsense steps you can take to prevent your dog from ingesting too much water.

- Whenever she's in or near water, make sure you're there to supervise. If she likes retrieving a ball or other toy from the water, make sure she takes frequent breaks. And be especially careful when the water is rough.
- Watch your dog closely when he's interacting with the water. If his mouth is open a lot, you should assume he's ingesting water, and potentially too much. Dogs who dive beneath the water's surface to retrieve items are also ingesting water.

- Know the symptoms of water intoxication and monitor your dog's appearance and behavior any time she's playing in water.
- After exercise or a competitive event, make sure your dog rehydrates safely. If he laps up every drop in his water bowl, let him rest for a while before offering a refill. Take water with you when your dog exercises so you can give him frequent short water breaks to keep him hydrated.
- If your dog likes to play in or drink from the hose or sprinkler, monitor her activity closely. Water from a hose or sprinkler is under pressure, which means she can ingest a great deal of it in a short amount of time.

Hypernatremia (Saltwater Poisoning)

If you and your dog enjoy time at the beach, it's important to also be aware of the potential for saltwater poisoning. Anytime your dog is around saltwater, keep an eye out to ensure he's not ingesting too much, limit trips to about two hours, take frequent breaks and offer him plenty of fresh water to drink.

The symptoms of salt poisoning may come on gradually, and pet parents may not equate a trip to the beach with anything dangerous, which means the condition often goes unnoticed until the symptoms have progressed to a life-threatening level.

Salt was once recommended as a tool to help induce vomiting in dogs and cats, but this is no longer the case due to the dire consequences that can occur if too much is ingested. Excess salt is poisonous to dogs (and cats) and can lead to the following symptoms:¹

- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Tremors
- Lethargy
- Walking as if "drunk"
- Seizures
- Excessive thirst or urination
- Abnormal fluid accumulation in the body
- Coma
- Loss of appetite
- Injury to the kidneys
- Death

If you catch the symptoms early enough, salt poisoning, also known as hypernatremia, may be treated with the administration of IV fluids, monitoring of electrolytes, treatment for dehydration and brain swelling, and supportive care. Even with treatment, salt poisoning has a mortality rate of greater than 50%,² but offering your dog fresh water immediately may help (and may help to prevent salt poisoning entirely).

In fact, if your dog has ingested too much salt, he'll likely experience increased thirst, which will prompt him to drink more water to compensate. As long as fresh water is available, the effects of salt ingestion will be limited. However, problems can quickly arise if fresh water isn't available, such as during a beach day when your dog may turn to drinking more and more saltwater in an attempt to quench his thirst.

After increased thirst, vomiting may be the next clinical sign to watch for if you're worried your dog ingested too much salt. This can progress to neurological symptoms like tremors, seizures and disorientation. If your pet has lost the ability or desire to consume fresh water, IV fluids will be urgently needed, so seek emergency veterinary care immediately.

The sooner your dog receives treatment, the better his chances of recovery. If you seek help immediately, especially before signs of poisoning have started, emetic medications may be given to encourage vomiting and get some of the excess salt out of your dog's system.

How Much Salt Is Too Much?

It takes only a small amount of salt to cause toxic symptoms in dogs. For example, a Yorkie or Chihuahua weighing 10 pounds or less could experience poisoning from consuming as little as 0.05 tablespoons (Tbsp.). For comparison, the following amounts may be toxic in dogs of other sizes:³

- **Dogs weighing 11 to 25 pounds** (Pug, Boston Terrier, Poodle) — 0.5 Tbsp. or more
- **Dogs weighing 26 to 40 pounds** (Beagle, Scottish Terrier) — 1.3 Tbsp. or more
- **Dogs weighing 41 to 70 pounds** (Boxer, Cocker Spaniel) — 2 Tbsp. or more
- **Dogs weighing 71 to 90 pounds** (Golden Retriever, German Shepherd) — 3.5 Tbsp. or more
- **Dogs weighing 91 to 110 pounds** (Great Dane, St. Bernard) — 4.5 Tbsp. or more

Keep in mind that these are only estimates, and that saltwater at the beach is only one source of salt poisoning in pets. Others include homemade play dough or salt dough ornaments, de-icing salts (such as rock salt), paint balls, table salt, enemas containing sodium phosphate.

Sources and References

[Whole Dog Journal, February 8, 2024](#)

¹ [Pet Poison Helpline, Salt](#)

² [Merck Veterinary Manual, Overview of Salt Toxicity](#)

³ [Pet Poison Control, Salt](#)
