

The Topic Nobody Wants to Discuss, but It Matters to Your Vet

It's one of those unsavory topics that dog owners avoid talking about. In fact, if your dog has done it (and probably has at least once), you've probably just dealt with it and went on with life. But the next time it happens, you should pay closer attention and here's why.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Almost every dog vomits occasionally, but some dogs regurgitate, which is a different problem
- Whereas vomiting is an active process, regurgitation is passive and occurs without warning
- Dog vomit takes various forms, and the look of it can give clues as to the reason behind it
- There are many causes for vomiting, some benign; the causes for regurgitation are different and may signal a serious underlying disorder
- Vomiting and regurgitation not only have different causes, but also require different treatment protocols

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If you have a dog in the family, make no mistake, at some point there will be dog vomit. Perhaps you've already had the pleasure. It may happen outside, or it may happen indoors. It may happen without warning, or it may happen after Princess makes a few telltale coughing or gagging sounds.

Many pet parents aren't exactly sure what's happening when something suddenly flies out of their dog's mouth. For example, did you know there's a difference between vomiting and regurgitating? Having this information can be extremely helpful in determining whether you should call your veterinarian, and what to tell him or her at your appointment.

Since your dog isn't likely to agree to a repeat performance at the vet's office, knowing what he was doing before you get there is beneficial in diagnosing the problem. And if you can manage it, take a video of the event and bring it with you to your appointment. It may seem weird, but it can actually help your vet arrive at a solid diagnosis in much less time than it might otherwise take.

Vomiting vs. Regurgitation

Most veterinarians, when presented with the "vomiting pet," first have to determine whether the animal is actually vomiting or is instead regurgitating. Deciding which is happening is very important, because the problems have different causes and different treatment approaches.

If your dog is about to vomit, he feels nauseous. His abdominal walls are beginning to contract. He may drip or drool saliva or begin licking his lips right before he retches. Often there's a heaving motion in which his abdominal muscles begin to contract several times before he actually empties the contents of his stomach onto your floor.

Per PetMD, vomiting involves "the forceful ejection of stomach and upper abdominal contents." Further, vomit contains "yellow bile or partially digested dog food," and "usually smells sour and involves heaving."¹

If your dog regurgitates, chances are he'll simply open his mouth and out will come part of the undigested food he just swallowed or the water he just drank. Regurgitus (an actual word) originates from either the esophagus or the pharynx (the back of the throat), which is why sometimes it's shaped like a tube. It's typically a mixture of food, saliva and sometimes mucus — but not bile. There's usually no warning with regurgitation — for your dog or for you. It's passive, whereas vomiting is an active process.

As if two varieties weren't plenty, a third variety of spew involves expectorating. If your dog coughs, either once or several times, and then produces a blob of mucus, she is expectorating, which is very different from regurgitating or vomiting. The key with expectoration is that there's always a cough involved.

Types of Dog Vomit

PetMD lists three varieties of dog vomit:

Granular:

- Often food-related
- Somewhat liquid
- Granules look like coffee grounds
- May see blood
- Partially digested food

Chunky:

- Often food-related
- Can see food pieces
- Food hasn't been digested
- Happens soon after eating
- Dog ate quickly or ran after eating

Liquid:

- Not food-related
- Can be foamy or slimy
- May be yellow or clear
- Can be confused with kennel cough symptoms

Causes of Vomiting

One of the most common reasons dogs vomit is dietary indiscretion, otherwise known as dumpster diving or ingesting non-food items like toys, socks, sticks, rocks, etc. Dogs who've been eating the same food for long periods may throw up if a sudden switch is made to their diet.

If your dog eats something toxic, like a poisonous plant or medication or chocolate, he may vomit, and in fact, in this case it could save his life.

Dogs who eat too fast tend to throw up more often than average, and so do dogs who are allowed to exercise vigorously right after a meal. It's important not to let your dog engage in strenuous exercise or play for an hour after eating, to avoid not only vomiting, but the much more serious problem of bloat (gastric dilatation volvulus).

Some dogs develop motion sickness, which can cause vomiting, as can **extreme fear or anxiety**, which is a much more serious problem than people realize. Grass-eating, which many dogs seem to do when they have an upset stomach, can trigger vomiting. They know instinctively that eating grass will make them throw up and throwing up will make them feel better.

Other, very serious reasons a dog vomits include a blockage in the stomach or intestines; inflammatory bowel disease (IBD); a disease of the kidneys, liver or pancreas; a middle ear problem; meningitis; or a brain tumor.

If your dog very occasionally throws up and you can identify the cause as eating too fast or eating something she shouldn't have (that isn't toxic), as long as she's otherwise healthy, there's no need to panic. If she starts eating what she just threw up, it's most likely a case of vomiting due to eating too fast, and it's fine (if gross) to let her do this.

However, anything outside this scenario — such as frequent vomiting or vomiting accompanied by other symptoms like loss of appetite or lethargy — should prompt a visit to your veterinarian.

Causes of Regurgitation

Unfortunately, regurgitation in dogs can be a sign of a serious underlying disorder. A disease of the esophagus is the most common cause and is either the result of an obstruction or a motility problem. The esophagus can be obstructed by a foreign body, stricture, vascular abnormality, or less commonly, a tumor.

Motility disorders or problems with the muscle contractions of the esophagus can be either congenital or acquired. An acquired motility disorder can be caused by esophagitis (inflammation of the esophagus), hypoadrenocorticism (Addison's disease), lead toxicity, organophosphate toxicity, myasthenia gravis (a neuromuscular disorder) and possibly hypothyroidism. A condition called megaesophagus also causes regurgitation.

Though uncommon, regurgitation can also be caused by pharyngeal dysphagia, which is a swallowing disorder. Dogs with this condition can have difficulty or pain when swallowing, causing them to cough or gag when they try to swallow. Pharyngeal dysphagia can be the result of a neuromuscular disorder, a tumor on the pharynx, an anatomic abnormality or trauma.

As you can see, vomiting and regurgitation are actually very different problems. The reasons a dog vomits are wide-ranging but are much different than the reasons he regurgitates.

In an otherwise healthy pet, the tendency to vomit is usually tied to the diet, dietary indiscretion, possibly a toxin or foreign body, or a developing condition like inflammatory bowel disease. Regurgitation happens for reasons unrelated to the diet or the health of the lower gastrointestinal (GI) tract.

The diagnosis and treatment of the two problems are quite different as well, which is why it's important to recognize one from the other and pass on your observations to your veterinarian so he or she can take the appropriate action.

Sources and References

¹ [PetMD](#)
