

Not Just the Chills – The Surprising Reasons Dogs Shake

Examine the wide range of reasons dogs shake — from common everyday triggers to more serious health conditions.

Reviewed by [Dr. Tracy Duffner](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs shake for many reasons — ranging from harmless excitement or drying off after a bath to serious conditions like poisoning, seizures, or hormonal imbalances requiring immediate veterinary attention
- Environmental triggers such as cold weather, loud noises, or stressful situations often cause temporary trembling, while emotional states like fear or joy may produce noticeable but generally harmless shivers
- Shaking can also signal pain, discomfort, or age-related issues, including arthritis, muscle weakness, or canine cognitive decline, all of which may benefit from veterinary assessment and supportive care
- Some dogs tremble due to medical concerns such as nausea, hypoglycemia, Addison's disease, fever, or side effects from medications, underscoring the importance of careful monitoring and timely intervention
- Persistent, severe, or unexplained shaking should never be ignored — especially if paired with vomiting, lethargy, collapse, or breathing difficulty — making prompt veterinary evaluation essential for your dog's well-being

For many dog owners, seeing their companion trembling or shivering can be both puzzling and worrisome. Is your pet simply cold? Are they frightened? Could it be something more serious?

Shaking, shivering, or trembling can occur either voluntarily (when your dog intentionally shakes, such as after a bath) or involuntarily (when their muscles spasm without control, as in cases of illness or injury). Understanding the context of what your dog was doing before the episode, what the environment is like, and whether other symptoms are present is the key to knowing how to respond.

Why Dogs Shake — An Overview

The truth is that shaking in dogs is a complex behavior with a variety of possible causes. Some are entirely harmless and temporary, while others may be a signal of pain, illness, or even a medical emergency. Because there are many different causes, it is important for you as a pet parent to be observant.

Shaking that occurs occasionally and resolves quickly with an obvious explanation, such as excitement or being cold, generally does not require medical attention. However, persistent, severe, or unexplained trembling should never be ignored. Below are some of the common causes of shaking.

Environmental and Emotional Causes

Dogs are emotional creatures, and their bodies often reflect their feelings. They can shake when they are excited or afraid, or if they need a little attention. The weather and/or temperature in your home can also lead to shaking.^{1,2,3,4}

- **Shivering from cold** — Just as people shiver in chilly temperatures to generate heat, dogs' muscles contract rapidly to warm their bodies. Small breeds, puppies, older dogs, and short-haired breeds are particularly prone to this because they lack thick insulation. Provide your dog with warm bedding, a sweater or coat for walks, and limiting outdoor time in frigid conditions to prevent cold-related trembling.
- **Excitement and joy** — Many dogs tremble when they are excited, such as in anticipation of a walk, greeting a beloved family member, or receiving a favorite treat. This type of shaking is temporary and generally harmless, resolving once the initial excitement subsides.
- **Drying off after a bath** — Dogs can remove much of the water from their coat in a single shake, preventing discomfort and helping them regulate their temperature. Keep towels handy after baths or swims to assist and reduce the inevitable spray of water across your living room or bathroom.
- **Stress, fear, and anxiety** — Thunderstorms, fireworks, veterinary visits, or unfamiliar surroundings often trigger trembling. The release of adrenaline in response to these stressors prepares the body for a "fight or flight" reaction, and shaking is a common byproduct.

You can help by creating a safe space, providing reassurance, or using calming aids such as anxiety wraps or pheromone diffusers. It is important, however, not to reinforce the anxious behavior by over-coddling. Remaining calm yourself can also signal to your dog that there is no danger.

- **Attention-seeking behavior** — Dogs quickly learn which behaviors gain a response from their humans. Some clever companions discover that trembling earns immediate sympathy and affection. While this may seem harmless, reinforcing the behavior unintentionally can make shaking a go-to tactic whenever your dog wants attention, food, or comfort.

If you are confident that the shaking is not due to pain, illness, or fear, avoid rewarding it with excessive attention. Instead, redirect with toys, puzzles, or training to engage them positively.

Medical Causes of Shaking

While many instances of shaking are benign, some may point to underlying medical conditions that require professional care.^{5,6}

- **Itching and skin irritation** — Sometimes shaking is a way for dogs to relieve localized discomfort. Head shaking is particularly common in dogs with ear infections, while full-body shakes may follow itching caused by fleas, allergies, or skin irritation. Persistent head-shaking, scratching, redness, or odor should prompt a veterinary evaluation.
- **Pain and discomfort** — Dogs often shake when they are in pain. This may result from arthritis, back injuries, dental problems, urinary tract infections, or skin conditions. Pain-related trembling is often accompanied by other signs such as limping, whining, or reluctance to move. Veterinary evaluation is essential if you suspect pain, as early intervention can significantly improve your pet's comfort and quality of life.
- **Aging and neurological changes** — As dogs grow older, they may develop muscle weakness and neurological changes that result in trembling. Sometimes referred to as the "senior shake," this is a common

feature of aging. Older dogs are also more likely to shake due to arthritis pain or cognitive decline.

Providing orthopedic bedding, maintaining gentle exercise, and working with your veterinarian on pain management can support an aging dog through these changes.

- **Side effects of medications** — Like humans, dogs may experience side effects from medication, and shaking is one possible reaction. The specific drug, dosage, and your dog's health status all influence this. If trembling begins after a new medication is introduced, consult your veterinarian promptly to discuss alternatives or adjustments.
- **Seizures and neurological disorders** — Seizures are sometimes mistaken for ordinary shaking, but they are far more serious. During a seizure, dogs may lose consciousness, paddle their legs, or lose bladder control. Other neurological disorders, such as cerebellar disease or generalized tremor syndrome, can also cause chronic shaking. Any suspicion of seizures warrants immediate veterinary attention.
- **Hypoglycemia (low blood sugar)** — This is a common issue in puppies, small breeds, and diabetic dogs. Symptoms include trembling, weakness, confusion, and sometimes collapse. Hypoglycemia is a medical emergency, and prevention involves regular feeding and monitoring for at-risk pets.
- **Nausea and stomach upset** — Digestive upset can cause trembling, often accompanied by drooling, vomiting, or loss of appetite. While mild nausea may resolve on its own, persistent symptoms could indicate poisoning, infection, or another underlying illness.
- **Fever and illness** — Dogs may shake when running a fever, as their body attempts to raise its temperature to fight infection. Conditions such as distemper — a serious viral disease — can also present with shivering alongside coughing, lethargy, and vomiting.
- **Addison's disease and hormonal disorders** — Addison's disease, caused by insufficient adrenal hormone production, often leads to shaking, weakness, vomiting, and lethargy. Diagnosis requires veterinary testing, and management usually involves lifelong medication.
- **Poisoning** — Many everyday substances like chocolate, grapes, moldy foods, xylitol, certain plants, pesticides, or medications are toxic to dogs. Signs may include drooling, vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, muscle tremors, and loss of coordination. If poisoning is suspected, immediate veterinary intervention is critical.

When to Seek Veterinary Help

While occasional, mild shaking is often harmless, certain red flags should prompt immediate attention:⁷

- Shaking accompanied by vomiting, diarrhea, or drooling
- Lethargy, collapse, or unresponsiveness
- Seizure-like movements or loss of bladder control
- Signs of pain such as whining, limping, or guarding
- Gums that appear pale, blue, or unusually red
- Difficulty breathing or excessive panting
- Sudden or severe onset of trembling without explanation

When in doubt, err on the side of caution and consult your veterinarian. Treatment depends on the underlying cause:

- Pain can be treated with anti-inflammatory drugs, supplements and herbal formulas, pain relief modalities such as acupuncture or laser therapy, and physical therapy
- Glucose supplementation and dietary management are essential for hypoglycemia
- Seizures may require anti-seizure medications, brain support measures, and monitoring
- Poisoning requires immediate veterinary interventions. Activated charcoal, detoxification or antidote medications, or IV fluids may be needed
- Infections require antibiotics or supportive care

If the cause of shaking is not medical-related, simple adjustments to your pet's living space may help address the issue. Remember, you play a crucial role in your dog's comfort and safety. Here are some simple tips to follow:

- Provide a warm, comfortable resting area
- Create a calm, stress-free environment
- Offer regular routines for exercise, feeding, and rest
- Use calming aids like wraps, diffusers, or soothing music
- Avoid unintentionally rewarding anxious behavior
- Monitor closely for any changes in appetite, energy, or mood

Shaking in Dogs Is Not Always a Cause for Alarm, but Is Always Worth Observing

Sometimes shaking is simply the body's way of coping with cold or releasing emotional energy. Other times, it may indicate pain, illness, or a medical emergency. By paying close attention to context, accompanying symptoms, and changes over time, you can better understand what your dog's body is telling you. And when in doubt, your veterinarian is your best resource for ensuring your pet's health and safety.

Ultimately, shaking is one of the many ways dogs communicate with us. By listening carefully, you can provide the comfort, care, and protection your companion deserves.

Sources and References

^{1,6,7} [Tractive, August 6, 2025](#)

² [Hill's Pet, May 27, 2020](#)

^{3,5} [PetMD, March 11, 2025](#)

⁴ [Animals \(Basel\). 2024 Nov 13;14\(22\):3248](#)
