

# When Your Dog is Vomiting or Having Diarrhea (acute)....

*\*\*please note: these recommendations are for acute diarrhea/vomiting only—that is, a duration of 3 days or less—the causes, tests and treatment can be very different for chronic diarrhea/vomiting\*\**

## **At home first aid:**

There are many possible causes of acute vomiting and diarrhea in dogs. Some causes are much more benign than others. If your dog is otherwise doing well—normal activity level and appetite, no blood in the stool or vomit—it is appropriate to try some at-home first-aid before seeking the advice of a veterinarian. If your pet is lethargic, refusing food or having bloody vomit or diarrhea, you should take him or her to your veterinarian immediately.

If your dog is vomiting or having diarrhea, you should skip his or her next meal. After this, you can start feeding the bland diet.

The bland diet may be formulated, such as Hill's i/d, or home-made. A home-made bland diet for dogs is a mixture of a starch and a lean protein, in a 4:1 (starch:protein) ratio. Possible starches include boiled white rice or cooked pasta, and the protein may be boiled skinless chicken or turkey.

For the first day you are feeding the bland diet, you should feed this diet at a restricted quantity. This means ½ of the amount you normally feed, divided into 4-6 small meals given throughout the day; for instance if you normally feed your dog 2 cups per day, on this day you should put aside 1 cup of the bland diet in your refrigerator, and feed small amounts of this every 4 to 6 hours.

If your pet does well this first day of this restricted feeding, the following day you can return to your normal feeding schedule, but please feed only the bland diet. 2-3 days after all vomiting and diarrhea have resolved, you can slowly (over 4-7 days) transition your dog back to his or her regular diet.

If your pet does not respond to these treatments or gets worse at any time, please contact your veterinarian.

## **Treatments your veterinarian may recommend:**

Symptomatic treatment: these treatments are specific to your pet's symptoms, such as diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dehydration, etc. Your pet will be treated symptomatically if you do not wish to pursue diagnostic testing such as bloodwork, fecal tests and x-rays, or if these tests are all negative. Symptomatic treatments may include:

- Fluid therapy
- Anti-vomiting medications (Cerenia, Reglan, Zofran)
- Stomach protectants (Pepcid AC, sucralfate, omeprazole)
- Flagyl (this is an antibiotic that is also anti-inflammatory in the gastrointestinal tract)
- Bland diet and restricted feeding (see above)
- Pain medications
- Probiotics

Specific treatment: these are treatments based on the cause of the diarrhea or vomiting, as determined by diagnostic tests

## Possible causes of vomiting and/or diarrhea and diagnostic tests for these causes:

\*\*please note: this list is not intended to be exhaustive\*\*

### The most common causes are:

- *Dietary indiscretion/rapid dietary change:* this occurs when a dog eats something that has upset their gastrointestinal tract, such as garbage, table scraps, etc., or when their diet is changed suddenly, rather than slowly over one week. This cause will be strongly suspected based on your pet's physical examination and history, and usually responds very well to symptomatic treatment.
- *Colitis:* this is an inflammation of the colon, which usually causes diarrhea (often with straining to defecate and mucus in the diarrhea) but can also cause vomiting, or vomiting alone. There are many many causes of colitis, including dietary indiscretion and stress. Colitis usually responds very well to symptomatic treatment.
- *Gastrointestinal (GI) foreign body:* these are inedible objects that a dog may have eaten, such as a toy or a piece of string, that are causing an obstruction in the stomach and/or small intestine. Usually dogs with foreign bodies will show vomiting, lethargy, refusal of food and reduced stool production, however stools may be normal and early in the obstruction the dog may play and eat normally. Some foreign bodies may be removable by endoscope, however most require surgery. If surgery is unduly delayed the intestines may break down (depending on the type of foreign body and how long it has been there), causing peritonitis and possible death.

X-rays are the first step in diagnosing a GI foreign body, and in many cases are adequate to confirm or rule-out a foreign body. If x-rays cannot confirm or rule-out a foreign body in your pet, further tests may be recommended such as an ultrasound, a contrast (barium) x-ray series, submission of the x-rays for a specialist (radiologist) to review or recheck of x-rays the following day.

- *Pancreatitis:* this is an inflammation of the pancreas; while this can be due to obesity, a recent high-fat meal or any abdominal trauma, in most cases the cause of pancreatitis is not known. Patients with pancreatitis usually vomit, but they may have diarrhea only. In addition to vomiting, they are usually lethargic and have severe abdominal pain; this may cause them to adopt a hunched-back posture, to reduce any pull on their abdomen.

Your veterinarian will be very suspicious of pancreatitis based on the physical examination alone; however special bloodwork (pancreatic lipase immunoreactivity, or "cPLI") and/or an ultrasound are required to diagnose this definitively. The cPLI blood test will take 1-2 business days for results; while the veterinarians at La Costa Animal Hospital may be able to schedule an ultrasound with a board-certified radiologist on the same day that your pet is seen, this may also take several days to schedule. Even though these test results will not be available the day that your pet is seen, they will be recommended, as if there is pancreatitis it is important that we know it. This is because acute pancreatitis can become chronic pancreatitis, which can have many consequences including diabetes. If your pet has pancreatitis when he or she is first seen, we will recheck him or her after the treatment course is finished to ensure the pancreatitis has completely resolved and there is no chronic pancreatitis. Chronic pancreatitis can be impossible to detect without bloodwork or an ultrasound, and we do not want this to go undetected and cause permanent damage.

Treatment of pancreatitis will depend on how severely your pet is affected. Badly affected pets may be severely dehydrated and very painful; some cases can develop leaky blood vessels termed "vasculitis", which can cause fluid to leak out of blood vessels and into the lungs, thoracic cavity and abdominal cavity. These patients require hospitalization and some cases require a blood transfusion. Mildly affected dogs can be treated at home as outpatients, but will likely receive some injectable treatments at your veterinarian before being sent home.

### Other less common causes of diarrhea and vomiting:

- *Parasites:* while parasites such as worms or protozoa (most commonly coccidia and giardia) usually do not cause any stomach upset in healthy adult dogs, these are common causes of diarrhea and possibly vomiting in puppies. While a general fecal exam looks for worms and coccidia, a specific test called an antigen ELISA is best for testing for giardia.
- *Other infections:* infections such as *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *Cryptosporidia*, *Clostridia*, parvovirus, coronavirus, distemper virus or circovirus can cause acute vomiting and diarrhea. The veterinarians at La Costa Animal Hospital can test for all of these infections with a fecal test that we submit to Idexx Laboratories; results can take up to 3 business days.
- *Addison's disease:* this is an underactivity of the adrenal glands that can have many signs and symptoms, however common symptoms are vomiting, diarrhea and lethargy. Patients with Addison's disease lack the ability to produce corticosteroids and mineralocorticoids, which are critical to life and need to be supplemented. If the mineralocorticoid level is too low, the patient will have a high potassium level, a low sodium level, severe dehydration and a dangerously low heart rate. These patients are seriously ill and can die without immediate treatment. In less severe cases, potassium and sodium will be normal on bloodwork, and a test called an ACTH stimulation test is required to diagnose this condition. This test will be done after a 12 hour fast, and will involve a blood draw, injection of a hormone called ACTH, and a second blood draw 2 hours later. These test results are usually available the following day. Addison's disease is usually found in middle-aged female dogs, however older, younger and male dogs can be affected.
- *Medications:* if your pet is vomiting or having diarrhea and he or she has recently started a new medication, or you have started giving him or her a new supplement including herbal, holistic or all-natural supplements, please let your veterinarian know immediately.
- *Hemorrhagic gastroenteritis:* this is a serious condition in which dogs have bloody vomit, bloody diarrhea and very severe dehydration. These pets should be seen by a veterinarian immediately for treatment, which may require hospitalization. The cause of hemorrhagic gastroenteritis is unknown, but may be a hypersensitivity reaction to a food allergen or an intestinal bacteria or parasite. Prognosis is good if treatment is swift, but dogs may die if treatment is delayed.
- *Gastric dilation and volvulus ("bloat"):* this is a very serious condition that usually affects deep-chested dogs, such as Great Danes and Boxers, but can affect any dog. The stomach fills with gas and twists, cutting off blood supply. This condition is an emergency; if your dog is trying to vomit but cannot, or you see his or her stomach swell, you should drive your dog to the nearest emergency facility immediately. Once in the car, if it is safe for you to do so, you should call the emergency hospital to let them know that you are on your way and suspect your dog may have bloat, so that they can be prepared for your arrival. During our opening hours, the doctors at La Costa Animal Hospital are available to treat emergencies; when we are closed, California Veterinary Specialists at 2310 Faraday Avenue in Carlsbad (760 431 2273) can treat your pet.