

VOMITING IN DOGS

What causes vomiting?

Vomiting is not a disease; rather, it is a symptom of many different diseases, and it is one of the most common reasons dogs visit the veterinarian. Dogs can vomit up food, yellow bile, foam, grass or even occasionally worms. Dogs have a tendency to eat grass and then vomit it up when they feel nauseated. Many cases of vomiting improve on their own without medical intervention within twenty-four hours. Less commonly, vomiting may result from a serious illness. In severe cases, vomiting may lead to serious complications or even occasionally death if treatment is not begun early enough to prevent severe fluid and nutrient losses.

Nausea and associated vomiting will sometimes cause the dog to lick its lips, gag, swallow, pant, or frantically want to get outside to eat grass. Vomiting during or right after a car ride is not always cause for concern, as motion sickness is common in both dogs and cats. Diseases and certain situations such as a car ride can stimulate the nerves leading to the vomiting centers in the brain, resulting in nausea and vomiting. If your pet suffers from car sickness, ask your vet about medications to give prior to car rides to prevent problems.

Dogs that eat too much, too fast can sometimes vomit from doing this. Special bowls to slow eating and feeding practices can help to deal with this problem. Changing a dog's diet suddenly can cause vomiting. A change in diet should always occur gradually, mixing more of the new food in each day for 3-5 days, and slowing down if there is any gastrointestinal upset.

Typically in mild cases, food is withheld for 8 to 12 hours and injections of medications can be given to help alleviate the vomiting, then a bland, highly digestible diet is fed. Once the vomiting resolves, you can gradually switch back to the regular diet over several days. Owners should never withhold water unless instructed to do so by their veterinarian.

How can you tell if vomiting is serious in your dog?

If your dog does not appear systemically ill from the vomiting, the cause may be less serious. Some of the minor causes of vomiting include stomach or intestinal viruses, parasites, and dietary indiscretions (such as eating garbage or other offensive or irritating materials). For this type of vomiting, a minimum number of tests are performed to rule out certain parasites and infections. These cases may be treated with drugs to prevent nausea and vomiting, sometimes antibiotics and/or dewormers, and often, a special bland diet for a few days. This approach allows the body's healing mechanisms to correct the problem. You should expect improvement within two to four days; if this does not occur, see your veterinarian to do make a change in medication or perform further tests to better understand the problem.



Vomiting will need to be distinguished from regurgitation, which is a completely different thing. With regurgitation, the food never reaches the stomach, and comes back up from the esophagus. Regurgitated food will be undigested, sometimes covered with mucousy slime, might be sour smelling, and may resemble a tube in shape. When dogs have symptoms of regurgitation, the veterinarian will assess for a possible esophageal problem.

We attempt to determine how sick the dog is, so we know how quickly to act. Here are some of the things to look for that might indicate your dog needs to see the vet sooner rather than later.

1. Presence of diarrhea would make one want to treat vomiting sooner than they otherwise would in a dog that feels well.
2. Unwillingness to eat or drink for more than a few hours.
3. Dehydration – dry eyes and gums, and a “drawn up” appearance.
4. Abdominal pain – this can indicate a very serious problem.
5. High fever (>104°F).
6. Lethargy.
7. Vomitus with a large amount of blood in it.
8. Vomiting more than once or twice in a day, and and/or vomiting that continues for longer than a day or two. Vomiting that lasts for more than 2 weeks is officially chronic.
9. Weight loss.

If your dog is 5 months old or less or has not received the full series of puppy vaccines, a test for parvovirus will need to be done. Symptoms of parvovirus include vomiting, diarrhea that is often watery and bloody, and often severe lethargy, usually in a young dog. Pups with parvovirus can become very ill and even die if not treated with fluids and antibiotics and other medications. If treated promptly, a vast majority of young dogs with parvovirus will fully recover.

What types of tests are performed to find the cause of vomiting?

If vomiting is associated with several of the above signs or has become chronic, we perform a series of tests to try and determine the exact cause.

Bloodwork. Bloodwork may be done to evaluate the liver, kidneys, pancreas and other organs that if disease may cause vomiting, when there is actually nothing wrong with the gut. Sometimes special tests sent to a “GI Lab” will provide even more information about the intestines and pancreas, above and beyond routine bloodwork.

Fecal tests - A fecal flotation or other test might be done to detect the presence of intestinal parasites or other problems which can cause vomiting.

Radiography (x-rays) with or without barium or contrast dye and/or **ultrasound of the abdomen**, can provide more information about possible tumors, obstruction of the stomach or intestines, infection or other problems. If obstruction is present, it must be dealt with as soon as possible (often with surgery) to prevent serious problems, including possible death. Obstruction is often accompanied by significant abdominal pain, profuse vomiting and significant illness.

Surgery or Scoping – If all of the above fails to identify the problem resulting in treatment and resolution, biopsies of the stomach and intestinal tract by endoscopic examination, and/or exploratory abdominal surgery will often provide more information. Once the diagnosis is known, treatment may include special medications, diets, or surgery. Biopsies of the gastrointestinal tract and other organs can confirm the cause of vomiting, including infection, inflammatory disease or even cancer.

Food Trial – Sometimes it is necessary to feed your dog a hypoallergenic food in order to rule out food allergy as a cause of vomiting. There are two basic types of hypoallergenic food: hydrolyzed diets and novel/limited antigen diets. Hydrolyzed diets break proteins down into particles so small that they are unlikely to trigger an allergic response. Novel/limited antigen diets choose protein and carbohydrate sources for the food which your dog has likely not eaten before, and it limits the number of different ingredients in the food. In order to be effective the food selected for the trial must be fed exclusively, for at least 6-8 weeks prior to assessing its effect. Blood tests are available to assess for food allergies, but they are not highly reliable. A food allergy can develop at any time, even in animals who have eaten the same diet for a long time prior to developing allergies to its ingredients.

References:

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