

Dietary Indiscretions in Dogs

Dogs are widely known for their keen sense of smell and their satisfaction with items that would seem less than savoury to us. Although many dogs have 'strong stomachs' there are also many breeds that have a more sensitive digestive system. Regardless of which of these types our dogs fit into, there will always be those occasions where something is just too tasty to resist, and the consequences – usually one or a combination of vomiting, diarrhoea and flatulence – become all too apparent!

It is no shame to admit that your dog is a scavenger! It is a normal behaviour exhibited by the vast majority of individuals – even if it is done sneakily and you are not aware of it. However, if your dog is a known scavenger, it is always best to inform the vet so that they can be thinking of possible causes of your pet's condition.

Should my pet receive antibiotics for vomiting or diarrhoea?

No – antibiotics are largely contra-indicated in these cases! Vomiting and diarrhoea occur when there is:-

- ❖ an imbalance in the normal flora of the gastrointestinal system
- ❖ an imbalance in the salts in the body
- ❖ damage to the gastrointestinal system (e.g. a gastric ulcer)
- ❖ an infectious cause such as *H. pylori* or *Campylobacter jejuni*, or a virus
- ❖ a parasitic infection e.g. *Giardia*
- ❖ damage to or ineffectiveness of another organ system – usually the liver or kidneys
- ❖ a hormone imbalance, either as a result of an illness or as a result of pregnancy
- ❖ a build-up of toxins in the body
- ❖ an obstruction in the gastrointestinal tract

Of these causes, the only ones that may in some cases require antibiotics are those where a specific pathogen is present and has been identified. Parasites are treated with an appropriate anti-parasitic treatment (which may be required even if your pet is routinely treated preventatively for parasites). *Campylobacter* infections often do not require treatment, but there are some cases where specifically targeted antibiotics may be used following culture of the organism. In summary, it is rare that antibiotics are required!

The vast majority of vomiting and diarrhoea is caused by eating something that upsets the normal balance of bacteria in the gastrointestinal system. This frequently affects the small intestine, which is the part that is responsible for digestion of food. Overgrowth of one or more types of bacteria causes a reduction in other bacteria, which can cause discomfort, nausea and a change in faecal consistency. Most cases will resolve spontaneously over time, but there are some non-invasive measures that may help to speed recovery.

How should I stop my dog from scavenging?

There are various methods of discouraging scavenging behaviour, including clicker training, food-based reward systems and distraction with a toy. However, the only real way to prevent scavenging remains in using a basket muzzle. **Open-ended muzzles such as the fabric ones used in greyhounds do not prevent scavenging.** Closed-ended muzzles are the best type for those dogs that just won't accept 'no' as an answer!

Should I starve my pet for 24 hours if they have vomiting or diarrhoea?

The idea of starving a pet for 24 hours was popular in the past and works on the basis of, 'what doesn't go in, doesn't come out'. However, research has shown that if the cells in the gastrointestinal tract do not receive a fresh source of nutrients every few hours, they start to die back rapidly. Withholding food for 24 hours is more than enough time for the cells to start dying (this happens within 12-24 hours), so whilst starving your pet may reduce the volume of vomit or diarrhoea, it actually prolongs the duration of the problem and is detrimental to your pet's overall health. We therefore now mainly advise to continue to feed your pet through the problem. This may involve a temporary change of diet to a bland source of food such as white meat, white fish, easily digested carbohydrates (rice, potato) or in some cases, egg – the aim is to reduce the volume of faeces produced whilst maintaining gastrointestinal health. However, some pets do not need a change in diet at all.

How can I replace the fluids lost during these episodes?

Hydration is perhaps the most important consideration in any case of vomiting or diarrhoea. Fluid loss can be substantial in these cases, so blood pressure can fall and your pet may become very ill if these fluid losses are not replaced. The easiest way to replace fluid is to supply fresh water! However, if vomiting or diarrhoea has occurred several times or has been on-going for several days, your pet may need an electrolyte replacement solution (an equivalent of Dioralyte). The continual loss of salts through vomiting and or diarrhoea can further imbalance the salts in the body, prolonging the period of illness and potentially causing other, more serious problems. In some cases where the affected animal has become dehydrated or there is a suspected dramatic salt imbalance, intravenous fluid therapy may be required.

How long should I leave it before seeking veterinary attention?

If your pet has been suffering several episodes of vomiting or diarrhoea in one day or has had vomiting or diarrhoea for a number of days, veterinary treatment should be sought. In general, if your pet vomits or has diarrhoea more than 3 times in one day, a vet should be called. If your pet has had infrequent vomiting or diarrhoea (e.g. every 3 or 4 days) for over 3 weeks or has had frequent diarrhoea (every day or every other day) for 3 or 4 days, a veterinary appointment should be made. **If you are worried that your pet is quiet, lethargic or is not eating or drinking, do not wait for further episodes but make a veterinary appointment as soon as possible.** Whilst most cases of vomiting and diarrhoea are easily treated, the more serious causes must not be left, so it is always better to err on the side of caution!

Is there a medication to stop my dog vomiting?

Yes, there are several medications in this category. However, these medications do have severe – potentially fatal – consequences if used on a patient that has an obstruction within the gastrointestinal tract. It is likely that the affected animal will need an x-ray to confirm the absence of an obstruction if these medications are used and there is a possibility that an obstruction could be present.

Is there a medication to stop my dog having diarrhoea?

Unfortunately, diarrhoea is a little more difficult to stop than vomiting is! There is no specific anti-diarrhoea medication available, but in most cases, replacing salts in the gastrointestinal tract (even if there is no overall salt imbalance in the body) with electrolyte solutions will be enough to sort the problem out. If the diarrhoea is caused by *Giardia*, a protozoan that lives in water, your pet will need a specific course of anti-parasitic medication.

It is frequently thought that diarrhoea is caused by an increase in movements of the bowels, but the truth is actually the opposite! In the vast majority of cases, diarrhoea is caused by a reduction of

peristaltic movements of the intestines, resulting in an increased transit time of food and water through the intestines. Medication may therefore be given to try to increase the speed of gut movement. This medication is one that also helps to reduce nausea, but also comes with a risk to patients with gastrointestinal obstruction, so an abdominal x-ray may be required prior to its use.

Diagnosis of the problem

In most cases, the likely cause of vomiting or diarrhoea is apparent and supportive treatment can be instigated without the need for further testing. However, if the affected animal is subdued, has abdominal pain or other abnormal findings during its examination, further tests may be indicated. These could include blood tests, ultrasound scans of the abdomen, or chest and abdominal x-rays.

Treatments

The treatment for vomiting or diarrhoea will depend on the cause of the problem. Most cases will simply require time, fluid replacement (orally or intravenously), and potentially a temporary change of diet. Some may require medications to increase the speed of food passage through the intestines, whilst others may need injections to prevent vomiting. Oral antacids may be prescribed for your pet. In some cases, more invasive treatments may be needed including surgery, and for others, a primary cause may be found that requires treatment, such as kidney disease or a hormone problem. If your pet has eaten something toxic, anti-seizure medications may be required. It is common for patients that have severe disease to be hospitalized for close monitoring so that any changes can be reacted to promptly and your pet can have the smoothest and speediest recovery possible.