

Vomiting and diarrhoea

Vomiting and diarrhoea are common in dogs. Both are symptoms of other conditions rather than diseases in their own right and there is a vast range of dog diseases in which diarrhoea and/or vomiting may occur. In many cases the problem may be successfully treated without ever pinpointing the actual cause. However, the information that you give your vet may be vital in deciding whether the case is serious enough to need detailed investigations.

Diarrhoea: occurs when the normal function of the large bowel (intestine) is disturbed. The large bowel is responsible for absorbing water from the gut. Large amounts of very liquid faeces (droppings) are produced.

Vomiting: occurs when stomach juices are expelled from the mouth. It is important to distinguish vomiting from regurgitation. Regurgitation only occurs after a meal and the material will have visible lumps of undigested food which are often eaten again. True vomiting involves big contractions of the abdominal muscles, the material is more fluid and your dog will show signs of distress. The causes of both diarrhoea and vomiting include viral, bacterial or parasitic infections; changes in diet, stress or excitement, poisonous drugs or chemicals, blockages or damage to the digestive system or other body organs.

How can I tell that my dog is vomiting or has diarrhoea?

Dogs will eat anything and vomit readily as a protective mechanism to prevent toxic substances entering the body. Vomiting involves big contractions of the abdominal muscles before the stomach contents are eliminated, and your dog may salivate excessively or swallow immediately prior to doing so. If your dog has diarrhoea it may need to go to the toilet more frequently or have accidents in the house. Occasionally, bowel movements are not more frequent but just softer than normal.

Is it necessary to take the dog to a vet?

Both diarrhoea and vomiting occur as short lived (acute) conditions lasting 1-2 days which will often clear up on their own, and as long-term (chronic) problems which are usually more serious. If your dog does not appear to be in distress or be losing weight, all you may need to do is to withhold all food for a day and then give your dog small amounts of cooked fish, chicken or some other food which is easily digested. Make sure clean fresh water is available but do not give milk.

Contacting your vet

If vomiting or diarrhoea is continuous for more than 1-2 days your dog could become dangerously dehydrated and should be taken to your vet. Contact your vet sooner if a kitten is ill (because they get dehydrated more quickly than adults), if there is blood in the vomit or diarrhoea, if the faeces (droppings) are of a black and tarry appearance. Never treat your dog yourself with drugs from your own medicine cabinet because some human drugs are poisonous to dogs.

Your vet will ask you questions about the dog, such as:

- Is it ill or depressed?
- Has it eaten any unusual foods?
- Is there anything unusual about the colour and smell of its faeces (droppings) or vomit?
- When and how often is it being sick or having diarrhoea?
- Are there other dogs in the household and have these too been affected?

- Has the dog been hunting or scavenging left over human food?
 - Has it been given any medical treatment or been exposed to any potential poisons?
- Think about these questions before going to your vet and see if you can identify any possible reason why your dog may be ill.

A Persisting Problem

If the illness continues for more than a couple of days it may be necessary for your vet to carry out a range of tests to find out the cause of the problem. A small sample of your dog's faeces (droppings) will be examined for bacterial infections or parasites in the gut. Blood tests may also be taken to check for infection, kidney or liver disorders. An x-ray may be needed to see if there is anything abnormal in the gut. Sometimes your vet will put an endoscope into your dogs' stomach and intestine to try and see the cause of the problem and a small biopsy sample of intestine may be removed for examination.

Digestive upsets are unpleasant for you and your dog but in most cases your dog will be better within 1 to 2 days. If your dog is not improving after 24 hours make an appointment with your vet for further advice.