

Diarrhea

By Dr. Karen Becker

If you have a dog or a cat, at some point the topic of diarrhea is going to come up. If you have a four-legged family member at home, you know that the occasional bout of diarrhea just goes with the territory of pet ownership. In other words, it's not – if your dog or cat could eventually have a loose stool, it's "when is it going to happen?" Because at some point, it probably will.

Causes of Diarrhea

Knowing what to expect when your pet has loose stools and how to manage it when it happens is really good information to have. I'm producing this video to help you out. There are several reasons that dogs and cats get diarrhea, but the most common cause by far is called dietary indiscretion, which means your pet ate something that they shouldn't have and his/her body wants to get rid of it right away.

This is probably why the occasional bout of diarrhea is more of a problem for dogs than for cats. Cats tend to throw up, whereas dogs tend to have lower GI (gastrointestinal) problems and have loose stools. Many dogs are indiscriminate eaters, whereas cats tend to be more selective about what they put into their mouth, but kitties can still get into trouble.

If your dog eats a lot of sticks or an entire chew toy, diarrhea or intermittent loose stool can absolutely be the result. If your kitty swallows a rubber band, though it may not cause a GI blockage in his intestine, it absolutely can also cause some loose stool. You need to be thinking about different causes, but absolutely the same underlying result.

A sudden change in diet can also cause diarrhea in both dogs and cats, especially in pets who have been consuming the same food day in and day out for a long period of time. That's one of the reasons that I recommend variety in your pet's diet. If your dog or cat has a strong, resilient, GI tract, he/she should be totally capable of eating a different food regularly and not have diarrhea, just as your GI tract should be healthy enough that you can eat something different for breakfast and not have major gastrointestinal complications.

Our bodies, including our pets' bodies, were designed to eat a variety of different foods and process them adequately. If you feed your dog or cat the same food day in and day out, month after month, year after year, and then suddenly switch foods, that's reason enough to have terrible, explosive diarrhea. In this situation, it's really important to remember it's not the new food's fault. It's not "Oh my gosh. This is a toxic brand of new food." It's that your pet's gut has been conditioned to process only one type of food, which is not ideal, nutritionally or physiologically.

The goal is to diversify your pet's diet to include a variety of different foods with different nutrient content, which ultimately fosters diversified gut microbiomes, as well as makes the gut strong and resilient to be able to process different foods. We know that up to 80 percent of your dog's and cat's GI tract is located within the GI tract, so the more you can focus on creating good resilient strong GI tract, the healthier your overall pet will be.

If your pet has been a victim of a very monotonous diet, once the diarrhea is resolved, I do recommend that you commit to working on improving dietary diversity. Tip number one, if you want to feed your pet a different food, you need to make the transition slowly. I can't tell you the number of times that I've had clients that had no idea how terrible their food was that they were feeding. They almost were like hit by a lightning bolt. They're like "Oh my gosh. My pet's diet is absolutely terrible." They go home, throw the bag out and offer a brand new food. Then that night, they end up in the ER because their animal is incredibly debilitated because of profound diarrhea from a sudden dietary change.

With a healthy-gutted dog or cat, no problem. But if your dog or cat doesn't have a healthy gut, you need to transition to new foods very slowly. That would be days to weeks for dogs, and sometimes weeks to months for cats. I recommend if you have kind of a finicky feline, or if you have a dog that's been eating the same food for eight years, you would do 10 percent new food blended with 90 percent old food. Feed that for several days. Watch the stool then do 80 percent old food, 20 percent new food. Watch the poo for several days, then 70/30, 60/40, 50/50.

Over the course of several weeks to sometimes months, if you were doing this for a kitty, you will be able to wean your pet on to a new diet without any lower GI consequences. Watch the stool, because the stool is your best clue as to how quickly you can or can't switch your dog's or cat's diet.

Food allergies or sensitivities are another common cause of diarrhea for both dogs and cats. What many veterinarians will call inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) or inflammatory bowel syndrome (IBS) really are actually, when looked on microscopically, it's really an inflammatory response, probably from something that they're eating. Food allergies or food intolerances can oftentimes cause a lot of GI irritation. Both IBD and IBS have intermittent loose stools or diarrhea as a potential side effect. You need to be thinking about that if your pet has intermittent loose stools regularly.

Pancreatitis, which is inflammation of the pancreas, and feline hyperthyroidism can both have diarrhea as a symptom. Viral and bacterial infections in the gastrointestinal tract can also cause diarrhea. And obviously parasites, like giardia or another culprit. This microscopic parasite causes kind of a wax and wane type of diarrhea. It can actually be difficult for vets to diagnose.

If you have a young, otherwise healthy, dog or cat – but healthy vibrant, no problem – and they get loose stool out of the blue, you didn't switch the diet, they don't get into anything, they just have loose poo followed up by a firm poo for maybe a week to 10 days and then one day of loose poo, you have to be thinking about potential giardia. You need to ask your veterinarian to specifically check for it.

Stress is another reason that some pets will get loose stools. Stress-induced diarrhea occurs when peristalsis, which is this wave-like motion that food turns into poo, when peristalsis is increased, which happens with the stress response, oftentimes you end up with a dog or cat that has loose stools because of anxiety or stress.

Symptoms of Diarrhea

Diarrhea symptoms can be varied. Actually, there's a lot of people who think of diarrhea as diarrhea. But actually, frequency, urgency and loose watery stools are the classic signs, but actually straining is a symptom that a lot of people aren't aware of. Many pet guardians mistake diarrhea actually for their dog or cat being constipated, because all they see is the animal either in their litterbox hunched up, pushing, pushing, or the dog outside, they're hunched up and you don't see anything coming out. In your brain, you think "Oh my gosh. Maybe they're backed up," when really the increased urgency is causing them to strain when their colon is empty.

The symptoms usually in most diarrhea cases are explosive watery stools, but it can cause the pet to stay in a hunched up position because the urgency factor is still there. Diarrhea upsets the normal rhythmic contractions and sensations in the GI tract, which can cause pets to feel like they have to constantly eliminate, which means they spent all day in the box even though there's no more poo in their colon.

This is oftentimes difficult to judge if you have dogs that are really well house broken, and they're not going to have an accident inside. It's hard to know. If you think that your dog may be having diarrhea, you need to go out in your backyard and check. Obviously if you see a blob of watery loose poo, you need to take a paper plate or a piece of cardboard, scoop some of that loose material up and put it in a Ziploc baggie to take with you to the veterinary clinic to identify why the diarrhea is occurring.

Other symptoms that can sometimes go hand in hand with chronic diarrhea can be lethargy, loss of appetite and oftentimes, if there's infection involved, your dog or cat can have a fever, as well as dehydration. In most instances, really young healthy dogs or cats develop loose stool or diarrhea. They have it for a day and then it's gone. However, if your dog or cat is having chronic bouts of diarrhea, she runs the risk of becoming debilitated and ill from the symptom alone. Puppies and kittens, as well as small adult pets and geriatric animals are at the highest risk of becoming dehydrated from even a single episode of diarrhea.

If your dog or cat seems fine and healthy after a bout of diarrhea, it's safe to simply say watch your dog or cat. Keep an eye on them, and if they become lethargic, call your veterinarian. However, if you notice the combination of diarrhea with lethargy or fever or a sudden change in your pet's personality, that's reason enough to go to the veterinarian that day.

If your pet seems fine and had a bout of diarrhea but otherwise is acting fine, drinking, appears to be fine, my rule of thumb is if your dog or kitty has loose stool for more than three days and it's not going away, at least call your veterinarian and get their opinion. If your dog or cat is passing blood in the stool or if you have noticed weakness or any other signs of debilitation, obviously that's an ER situation. Go to the vet immediately.

Treatment and Recommendations

If your dog or cat is otherwise healthy and the behavior is normal, my recommendation is to withhold food, not water, for 12 hours. Doing this temporary, kind of short-term fast gives the

GI tract a chance to rest, repair and restore itself. Tissues can only heal when they are resting. Having no food coming in is a great time for the GI tract to just slow down and balance itself out.

I recommend that you follow a 12-hour food fast with a bland diet meal. I recommend that you use cooked, fat-free, ground turkey and 100 percent canned pumpkin. If canned pumpkin isn't available, of course you can use fresh, steamed pumpkin. But if you can't find either one of those options, you absolutely can use cooked sweet potato, and even cooked white potato.

Forty years ago, veterinarians recommended a bland diet of ground beef and rice, but this has kind of fallen out of favor for several reasons. Rice is very high in starch, a starchy carbohydrate that actually can ferment in the GI tract and provide a food source to opportunistic bacteria. Many of you that have tried the old hamburger rice thing, has seen the rice go in and has seen the rice come out, it's exactly the same. That tells you that it's not doing much in terms of providing caloric intake for you dog or cat in that situation.

Many people have found that because burger is higher in fat that their animals don't recover nearly as fast as doing fat-free ground turkey and a bland high-fiber veggie. Canned 100 percent pumpkin provides about 80 calories and seven grams of soluble fiber per cup, compared to 1.2 grams of fiber in a cup of cooked white rice. Pumpkin is especially rich in soluble fiber, which is the type of fiber that dissolves in water to form a viscous jelly that actually coats and soothes the GI tract really nicely. Soluble fiber also delays gastric emptying, which slows down the GI transit time and helps kind of naturally reverse the effects of this increased peristalsis.

When animals have diarrhea, they can also lose important electrolytes including potassium, which puts them at risk of dehydration. Hypokalemia is the medical term for this, or low potassium levels, can actually result in cramping, fatigue and weakness, as well as heart rate irregularities. Ironically, pumpkin happens to be an excellent source of potassium with 105 milligrams of naturally occurring potassium per cup. Pumpkin is much safer for diabetic patients than rice. It's a great source of fiber. Most animals love it, including cats. The new and improved recommendation is to ditch the rice and go with pumpkin.

In addition, dogs and cats don't have a nutritional requirement for grains. Rice is a grain. Feeding a pro-inflammatory food source like rice when your pets are already having a GI upset seems counterintuitive, and it is. There's also certainly a questionable issue about arsenic levels in white rice. Just to be safe, stick with a nice fiber rich veggie.

Tip number two, mix the turkey and pumpkin, 50/50, and feed it to your pet until the diarrhea resolves. If it doesn't clear up in about three days on a bland diet, time to call your veterinarian. I also recommend, tip number three, keeping some slippery elm on hand. Slippery elm is a neutral fiber source that works really well to ease episodes of diarrhea. I call it nature's Pepto-Bismol because it actually reduces GI inflammation and acts like a non-irritating source of fiber to bulk up the stool and slow down GI transit time to the GI tract.

I would recommend you give your dog or cat about half of a teaspoon or a capsule for each 10 pounds of body weight, with every bland meal you provide. I also recommend that you add in a

good-quality probiotic once your pet's stool starts to firm. In addition to slippery elm and probiotics, many owners have good luck with herbs such as peppermint, fennel or chamomile. These are especially helpful for the cramping or other GI symptoms that come along with the episodes of diarrhea.

There are several homeopathic remedies that can be very beneficial for intermittent diarrhea depending on your pet's specific symptoms, including nux vomica, veratrum, podophyllum, arsenicum album and china. They can all be really nice diarrhea remedies depending on specific symptoms.

If your pet's diarrhea isn't resolving or keeps returning, then you need to be thinking about something else going on that you probably will need your veterinarian's help with, in terms of a diagnosis. Collect a stool sample. All you need is about a quarter-sized amount of poop or even loose stool diarrhea. Scoop it up on a stiff piece of cardboard or a paper plate. Put it in a Ziploc baggie and take it to your veterinarian.

Your veterinarian will probably do bloodwork in addition to evaluating the stool. If there's infection present, we diagnose that with a systemic blood test. Your veterinarian should also correct any dehydration that your pet could be experiencing. That's done through IV (intravenous) or SQ (subcutaneous) fluids. Two fecal tests should be done. One checks for parasite antigens and/or eggs, and the other one checks for bacterial or viral agents that cause diarrhea.

If your pet is a puppy, chances are that he or she could be getting into grass, mulch, sticks, rocks, dirt, you name it. Puppies put it in their mouth. Every single time you take your puppy outside, the potential for him to eat something that could cause diarrhea is there. Obviously, close supervision of very young animals, dogs and cats both, is really important.

Puppies also carry a lot of internal parasites naturally. If the dam, when she was pregnant, if she had parasites, that entire litter of puppies automatically have parasites. One of my biggest pet peeves that my professional colleagues do is when they see young puppies, "Oh! Just give them a dewormer." One really important thing for every listener and reader to know is that there's no such thing as one universal dewormer. Roundworm, hookworm, tapeworm, coccidia and giardia, they need different dewormers. Don't let a veterinarian try to convince you that they're psychic and that one universal dewormer will get rid of all of those parasites. It's not true.

Guessing is bad medicine. You ask your veterinarian, if they're trying to push a dewormer on you, you ask them what parasite your dog or cat has before you would entertain the thought of giving your pet an unnecessary drug. My opinion, but pretty common sense.

Keep non-toxic houseplants, if you have pets, out of reach of those pets. It's important that your house is puppy and kitten proof. You need to go through and make sure that there's nothing in the house that your dog or cat could be recurrently getting into. Young animals are obviously very inquisitive about their environment, and they investigate with their mouths. Your new puppy or kitten, the very best incentive for keeping your house picked up is knowing that you have an animal in it that's going to probably sample everything.

It's also important that you pick up any food you dropped because animals that are eating different food, especially if you're including spices or sauces, that can cause GI upset as well.

Although we know that digestive disturbances come with the territory of owning pets, a bland diet and a really soothing herbal remedy – slippery elm – can usually do the trick of managing the occasional bout of diarrhea for dogs and cats.

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