

Diarrhea Remedies Straight Out of Mother Nature's Handbook

When do loose stools warrant a visit to the vet and when can you safely treat it at home? What to do for the first 12 hours to help your pet's GI tract rest and repair. Plus, the best food to feed to help reverse loose stools and specialized treatments straight from Mother Nature.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Occasional bouts of diarrhea are to be expected if you have a dog or cat in the family
- There can be many causes of diarrhea in pets, but the most common is dietary indiscretion
- Frequency, urgency and loose watery stools are the classic signs of diarrhea, but what many pet parents don't realize is that straining to go can also be a symptom
- Home treatment of occasional bouts of diarrhea in an otherwise healthy pet includes a temporary fast followed by a bland diet of fat-free cooked turkey and 100% canned pumpkin
- Recurring bouts of diarrhea, loose stools that last more than three days and diarrhea accompanied by other signs of illness should prompt a visit to the veterinarian

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If you have a four-legged family member at home, you know that the occasional bout of diarrhea just goes with the territory. It's not really a matter of if your pet will have diarrhea, but when. Because at some point, it's going to happen!

Knowing what to expect when your pet has loose stools — and how to manage it when it happens — is good information to have, preferably before you need it.

Causes of Diarrhea

There are several reasons dogs and cats get diarrhea, but the most common cause by far is dietary indiscretion, which means your pet ate something he shouldn't have and his body wants to get rid of it right away. This is probably why the occasional bout of diarrhea is more a problem for dogs than cats.

Cats tend to throw up, whereas dogs tend to have lower GI (gastrointestinal) problems and loose stools. Also, many dogs are indiscriminate eaters, whereas cats are typically more selective about what they put in their mouths.

If your dog eats a stick or a chew toy, diarrhea or intermittent loose stools can be the result. If your kitty swallows a rubber band, though it may not cause a GI blockage, it can still cause diarrhea.

A sudden change in diet can also cause diarrhea, especially in pets who are fed the same food day in and day out for a long period of time. It's one of the reasons I recommend variety in your pet's diet. If your dog or cat has a strong, resilient GI tract, he should be able to eat different foods regularly and not have diarrhea.

Just as your body is designed to eat different foods every day and not have diarrhea, so is your pet's. If you feed your dog or cat the same food day after day, month after month, year in and year out, then suddenly switch to a new diet, a case of diarrhea is just about guaranteed.

It's not the fault of the different food — it's because your pet's gut has been conditioned to process only one type of food, which is not ideal, nutritionally or physiologically.

Transitioning Your Pet to a Varied Diet

The goal is to diversify your pet's diet to include a variety of foods with different nutrient contents, which ultimately fosters a diversified gut microbiome, and makes the digestive system strong and resilient.

Up to 80% of your pet's immune system is located within the GI tract, so the more you focus on creating good gut health, the healthier your pet will be overall.

If you want to feed your pet a different food, you have to make the transition very slowly. I can't tell you the number of times I've had clients throw out their old pet food and switch their dog or cat immediately to a new food.

They often end up at the emergency animal hospital with a debilitated animal who's dealing with a terrible case of diarrhea due to the sudden dietary change.

A slow dietary transition means days to weeks for most dogs, and often weeks to months for cats. I recommend you start by feeding 10% new food blended with 90% old food for several days. Watch your pet's stool and if all seems well, move to 20% new/80% old.

Keep watching for stool changes and if none occur, move to 30% new food and 70% old, and so on, until you're feeding only the new diet. The process should be slow enough that no bowel changes occur.

Other Causes of Diarrhea

Food allergies or sensitivities are another common cause of diarrhea for both dogs and cats. What many veterinarians call inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is actually a response to something in the diet. Both IBD and IBS can cause intermittent loose stools or diarrhea.

Pancreatitis, which is inflammation of the pancreas, and feline hyperthyroidism have diarrhea as a symptom.

Viral and bacterial infections in the gastrointestinal tract can cause diarrhea. And parasites like giardia are another culprit. This microscopic parasite causes intermittent diarrhea that can be difficult to diagnose.

Let's say your otherwise healthy dog or cat develops intermittent loose stools seemingly out of the blue. You didn't switch her diet, she didn't eat anything she shouldn't have — she just has loose stools for a few days. About the time you think you should call your vet, the stool firms up on its own.

You assume all is well — until another bout of diarrhea occurs days or weeks later. At this point, it's time to ask your veterinarian to check for a giardia infection.

Stress is another cause of loose stools in some pets. Stress-induced diarrhea occurs when peristalsis, which is the wave-like motion of the GI tract that moves food through the intestines, is increased due to anxiety or stress.

Diarrhea Symptoms

Diarrhea symptoms can be quite varied. Of course, frequency, urgency and loose watery stools are the classic signs, but so is straining. Many pet guardians mistake constipation for diarrhea because they see kitty hunched up in her litterbox, or the dog hunched up outside, and nothing much seems to be happening.

What looks like constipation in this instance is really just another sign the pet is having a bout of diarrhea. Diarrhea upsets the normal rhythmic contractions and sensations of the GI tract, causing your dog or kitty to feel the constant need to eliminate. This is why she's hunching and straining.

If your indoor cat is having diarrhea, it's easy to know — just check the litterbox. Outdoor cats and dogs can be a bit more difficult to diagnose, so if you see your dog or kitty hunched up outside, check around for loose, brown or watery stools. If you find any, your pet is more likely to have diarrhea than constipation.

Other symptoms that can go hand-in-hand with diarrhea include lethargy, loss of appetite, fever and dehydration. Typically young, healthy pets have a single episode of loose stool or diarrhea, and it's done. However, if your dog or cat is having chronic bouts of diarrhea, she runs the risk of becoming debilitated and ill.

Puppies and kittens, small adult pets and older animals are at high 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 keep a careful eye on her. But if you notice any lethargy, or a fever or change in behavior, you should call your veterinarian.

If your pet seems fine otherwise but is having recurring episodes of diarrhea that don't seem to be resolving, or episodes that last more than three days, it's also time to call the vet for an appointment. If your dog or cat is passing blood in her stool or if you notice any weakness or other signs of debilitation along with diarrhea, it's important to get her to the vet immediately.

Treating a Pet With Diarrhea at Home

If your dog or cat is otherwise healthy and his behavior is normal, my recommendation is to withhold food — not water, just food — for 12 hours. A short-term fast gives the GI tract a chance to rest, repair and restore itself. Tissues can only heal when they're resting.

Follow the 12-hour food fast with a bland diet. I recommend cooked, fat-free ground turkey and 100% canned pumpkin. If canned pumpkin isn't available, you can use fresh, steamed pumpkin. If you can't use either one of those, you can use cooked sweet potato or even cooked white potato.

Many veterinarians still recommend a bland diet of ground beef and rice. I don't agree. Even the leanest ground beef is high in fat, which can worsen GI upset, and boiling it doesn't substantially decrease the fat content. That's why I recommend fat-free meat for bland diets. You can easily find fat-free ground turkey or turkey breast in most grocery

stores.

Rice is a very starchy carbohydrate that tends to ferment in the GI tract and also provides a food source for opportunistic bacteria. Rice also often zips right through the digestive system and leaves your pet's body looking just like it did going in. This tells you it hasn't provided much in the way of calories or nutrition.

Canned 100% pumpkin provides about 80 calories and 7 grams of soluble fiber per cup, compared to 1.2 grams of fiber in a cup of cooked white rice. The soluble fiber (the type that dissolves in water to form a viscous gel) in pumpkin coats and soothes the GI tract.

Soluble fiber also delays gastric emptying, slowing down GI transit times and helping to reverse the effects of increased peristalsis. When animals have diarrhea, they can lose important electrolytes, including potassium, which puts them at risk of dehydration. Hypokalemia, or low potassium levels, can result in cramping, fatigue, weakness and heart rate irregularities.

Pumpkin happens to be an excellent source of potassium, with 505 milligrams of naturally occurring potassium per cup. Pumpkin is also safer for diabetic pets than rice. And most animals love it, including cats.

Since dogs and cats don't have a nutritional requirement for grain, feeding a pro-inflammatory food like rice when they're already having GI upset is counter-intuitive. There's also the issue of arsenic in rice. 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, it's time to call your veterinarian.

Additional Treatment Suggestions

I also recommend 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 reduces GI inflammation and acts as a non-irritating source of fiber to bulk up the stool and slow down GI transit time.

Give your dog or cat about a half a teaspoon or a capsule for each 10 pounds of body weight with every bland meal. I also recommend adding in a good-quality probiotic once the stool starts to firm up. In addition to slippery elm and probiotics, many pet owners have good luck with herbs such as peppermint, fennel or chamomile. These are especially helpful for the cramping and other uncomfortable GI symptoms that come with 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.

When to See the Veterinarian

If your pet's diarrhea isn't resolving or keeps returning, I recommend you collect a quarter-size bit of poop on, for example, a stiff piece of cardboard, and slip it into a plastic baggie. Otherwise, your veterinarian may have to manually extract a sample, which will make your already uncomfortable pet that much more so.

Your vet will probably do bloodwork in addition to evaluating the stool to determine if there's infection present. He or she should also treat your pet for dehydration if necessary, with IV (intravenous) or SQ (subcutaneous) fluids. Two fecal tests should be performed. One test checks for parasite antigens and/or eggs, and the other checks for bacterial or

viral agents that cause diarrhea.

Prevention Tips

If your pet is a puppy, chances are he's getting into grass, mulch, sticks, rocks, dirt and who knows what else every time you take him outside. Close supervision of very young dogs is important. If you have a cat who is obsessed with your houseplants, again, supervision is essential.

Puppies naturally harbor internal parasites. If the mother dog had parasites during pregnancy, the litter will also have parasites. One of my pet peeves with my traditional veterinary colleagues is they often give a universal dewormer to every puppy they see.

The problem is, there's no such thing as a universal dewormer. Roundworm/hookworm, tapeworm, coccidia and giardia all require different dewormers. Don't let your veterinarian try to convince you that one universal dewormer will get rid of all of those parasites. It's not true.

Guessing is bad medicine. I recommend asking your veterinarian what specific parasite your dog or cat has before giving your pet what could be an unnecessary drug. Keep potentially toxic houseplants out of the reach of your pet. It's important that your house is puppy- and kitten-proof.

You should go through each room and make sure there's nothing potentially deadly your pet could get into. Young animals are naturally inquisitive about their environment, and they investigate with their mouths.

Your new puppy or kitten provides the very best incentive for keeping a clean, orderly home. It's also important to pick up any food you drop on the floor. Although digestive disturbances come with the territory of pet ownership, a bland diet and a soothing herbal remedy like slippery elm will usually do the trick in managing the occasional bout of diarrhea in dogs and cats.
