

Help! My Pet Has Diarrhea

If you're owned by a cat or dog, it's not if, but when you will deal with a bout of diarrhea. What should you do, and when does it become too serious to deal with at home? Here's what I recommend feeding, along with a handful of useful supplements, and when to see your vet.

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

Nov 6, 2022 • 10 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you have furry family members in your household, chances are you've dealt with (or will eventually deal with) the occasional bout of pet diarrhea
- There can be many triggers for diarrhea in dogs and cats, but the most common is dietary indiscretion — especially in canine companions
- Frequency, urgency, and loose watery stools are the most obvious signs of diarrhea, but it's important to know that straining to go (which can suggest the opposite problem) can also be a symptom of diarrhea
- Home management in an otherwise healthy pet includes a temporary fast followed by a bland diet of fat-free cooked turkey and 100% canned pumpkin plus beneficial supplements
- Recurring bouts of diarrhea, loose stools that last more than 3 days, or diarrhea accompanied by other signs of illness should prompt a visit to the veterinarian

It's the very rare pet parent who hasn't dealt with a dog's or cat's occasional bouts of diarrhea. In fact, if you're one of the lucky few who hasn't had the pleasure, don't gloat, because your turn is coming sooner or later!

The good news is that I'm about to arm you with the information you'll need when the inevitable occurs in terms of what to expect and how to respond.

Common Triggers for Diarrhea in Pets

There are several reasons dogs and cats develop diarrhea. The most common is dietary indiscretion, which means your pet ate something he shouldn't have, and his gastrointestinal (GI) tract goes into overdrive to get rid of it.

Dogs are more likely to be indiscriminate eaters than cats, which is one of the reasons diarrhea occurs more often in canines. Cats are typically more selective about what they ingest. For this reason and others, when it comes to digestive disturbances, cats tend to throw up, while dogs more often have lower GI issues and loose stools.

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 loose stools, especially in pets who are fed the same food every day for long stretches of time. It's one of the reasons I recommend dietary variety. Like us, animals with healthy, resilient GI tracts are 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.

Expanding Your Pet's Diet

The goal is to diversify your pet's diet so that it includes a variety of foods with different nutrient contents, which ultimately fosters a healthier gut microbiome and improves the resilience of the digestive system. Up to 80% of your pet's immune system resides in 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 different foods, treats or snacks, you must make the transition very slowly, offering tiny amounts of new foods at a pace that doesn't cause GI upset. 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 pet 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.

If you have a finicky cat or dog, sometimes it's best to start by removing 1/16th teaspoon of old food and replacing it with 1/16th teaspoon of new food, mixing the new flavor thoroughly into the old food (to disguise the new food enough that your discerning pet's palate doesn't reject it).

Treats can also cause GI upset, so start with one or two tiny, pea-sized morsels of new treats a day (including fresh fruits and veggies) until you know how your pet's system will respond.

More Diarrhea Triggers

Food sensitivities or allergies are another common cause of diarrhea for both dogs and cats. What many veterinarians identify as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) is often a response to something in the diet, or a microbiome imbalance. Ingredient sensitivities and IBS can both cause intermittent loose stools and diarrhea.

Conditions such as pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas), small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO), and colitis (inflammation of the colon) can have diarrhea as a symptom. Viral and bacterial infections in the GI tract can cause diarrhea, as can parasites like giardia. 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, then 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. Microbiome imbalances are another reason for intermittent GI symptoms.

Diarrhea Symptoms

Many pet parents don't realize that diarrhea symptoms in animal companions can be quite varied. Frequency, urgency, and loose watery stools are the classic signs, but so is straining. It's easy to mistake constipation for diarrhea when your cat is hunched up in her litterbox, or your dog is hunched up outside, and nothing much seems to be happening.

What looks like constipation in this instance is actually another sign your pet is dealing with 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, thus the hunching and straining.

If your indoor cat is having diarrhea, it's easy to tell — 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 along with diarrhea include lethargy, loss of appetite, fever, and dehydration. Young, healthy pets typically 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 3 days, it's also time to make an appointment with the vet.

Instituting these suggestions immediately when your pup's stool becomes loose is the best way to avoid popular but unnecessary GI medications from the vet, which research shows have lasting negative consequences on the microbiome.¹

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.

Home Management of Pet Diarrhea

If your dog or cat is otherwise healthy and his behavior is normal, my recommendation is to withhold food (never water) 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% pure pumpkin puree (canned or fresh, steamed pumpkin, if it's available). You can use cooked sweet potato or even cooked white potato, if you don't have access to pumpkin.

Many veterinarians still recommend a bland diet of ground beef and rice, but even the leanest ground beef contains fat that can worsen GI upset, hence the recommendation of 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 has a high glycemic index and can exacerbate some cases of SIBO. And if your pet is suffering from maldigestion or malabsorption, 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, or enough soluble fiber to help soothe an irritated GI tract.

Cooked 100% pure pumpkin puree 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 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 is 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 proinflammatory food like rice when they're already having GI upset is counter-intuitive. There's also the issue of arsenic contamination in rice.

Mix the cooked turkey and pumpkin, 50/50, and feed it to your pet until the diarrhea resolves. If it doesn't clear up within three days on a bland diet, it's time to call your veterinarian.

Beneficial Supplements

I recommend keeping some slippery elm and/or activated coconut charcoal 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 while also coating and soothing irritated bowels. Give your dog or cat about a half a teaspoon or a capsule for each 10 pounds of body weight with every bland meal.

Coconut charcoal is very binding, helping to slow voluminous, watery stools quickly. I also recommend adding in a good-quality probiotic once the stool starts to firm up.

In addition to slippery elm, charcoal 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's also a ready-to-dose, over-the-counter diarrhea treatment called Diagal that's very effective for occasional episodes of dietary indiscretion.

When to See Your Veterinarian

If your pet's diarrhea isn't resolving or keeps returning, it's time to make an appointment with your vet. 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 mostly likely do bloodwork to check for pancreatitis, in addition to evaluating the stool to determine if there's infection or parasites present. He or she should also treat your pet for dehydration, if necessary, with IV (intravenous) or SQ (subcutaneous) fluids.

Several diagnostic stool tests can shed light on underlying reasons for bowel issues, including a diarrhea panel, which tests for common bacterial or viral agents that cause diarrhea. A second test to check for parasite antigens and/or eggs is also important, and if the loose stools have been occurring with some regularity, a microbiome analysis can be very helpful in determining if dysbiosis (leaky gut) is involved.

Prevention Strategies

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.

Rescue puppies often harbor internal parasites. If the mother dog had parasites during pregnancy, the litter will also have them. The dams of well-bred litters will have been screened for parasites prior to breeding, and the litter also tested for parasites prior to sending the puppies to their new homes.

I don't recommend using anti-parasitic drugs or dewormers unless the stool test determines they are necessary. Deworming animals that do not have parasites can make bowel issues worse, so I never recommend deworming "just because."

The problem is, there's no such thing as a universal dewormer. Roundworm and hookworm, tapeworm, coccidia and giardia all require different dewormers with different dosing schedules; a dose of one deworming drug will not get rid of all parasites, and guessing is bad medicine, as it can make your pet feel worse.

I recommend asking your veterinarian what specific parasite your dog or cat has before giving what could be an unnecessary drug with unnecessary side effects.

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. I also recommend you do a household chemical inventory (including eliminating VOC-spewing plug-in air fresheners). "Going green" with cleaning products and eliminating possible chemical residues in and around the house reduces your pet's exposure and the possibility of accidental ingestion.

Although digestive disturbances come with the territory of pet ownership, a bland diet and soothing remedies like slippery elm and coconut charcoal will usually do the trick in managing the occasional bout of diarrhea in dogs and cats.

Sources and References

¹ [Chaitman, J. et al. Front. Vet. Sci., 16 April 2020](#)
