

The Weird Sneeze That Can Terrify Pet Parents

Caused by a spasm of the throat and soft palate, reverse sneezing can send owners running to the vet, thinking their pet is in serious distress. Know what can cause this strange respiratory event, how to recognize it and what to do when it occurs to help both you and your pet relax.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Reverse sneezing in dogs is caused by a spasm of the throat and soft palate, and is not usually cause for alarm
- Reverse sneezing occurs when your dog forcefully and quickly inhales air instead of pushing it out, as occurs during a normal sneeze
- This “backward sneeze” typically leads to a loud snorting or honking sound, and your dog may freeze in place with her front legs apart, neck extended and head back
- Household products like air fresheners, cleaning products and fragrances, as well as pollen, dust or powder can trigger a reverse sneeze
- Your dog’s soft palate may also be irritated by overexcitement, pulling on a leash or sudden changes in temperature
- You typically don’t have to do anything during a reverse sneezing episode, but since your dog may be frightened, you may want to speak to her calmly to reassure her that she’s OK

Also known as mechanosensitive aspiration reflex, inspiratory paroxysmal respiration and pharyngeal gag reflex, reverse sneezing occurs when your dog forcefully and quickly inhales air instead of pushing it out, as occurs during a normal sneeze.

This “backward sneeze” typically leads to a loud snorting or honking sound, which sometimes sounds like your dog is choking. If in doubt or your dog appears to be having difficulty breathing, you should seek veterinary care immediately. But in most cases, reverse sneezing resolves within 30 seconds to a minute without need for intervention.

How to Recognize a Reverse Sneeze

When an irritant triggers your dog’s soft palate to spasm, it can cause the trachea to narrow. As your dog attempts to fully inhale, a reverse sneeze can occur.

In addition to the startling sound, a dog that is reverse sneezing may freeze in place with her front legs apart, neck extended and head back. Her eyes may be wide or even bulging. The entire scenario should last only about 30 seconds, though it may extend up to a minute or two. Just as suddenly as it started, your dog will go back to her

normal self as though mothering happened.

While any dog and, rarely, even some cats, can reverse sneeze, it's more common in brachycephalic (flat-faced) breeds, such as boxers, bulldogs, pugs and shih tzus, which tend to have an elongated soft palate.¹ If your dog only reverse sneezes occasionally, it's considered normal.

What Causes Reverse Sneezing in Dogs?

Many types of irritants can trigger a reverse sneeze, which is your dog's way of trying to expel the irritant from the nasopharynx, which is near the soft palate. This includes household products like air fresheners, cleaning products and fragrances, as well as pollen, dust or powder. Further, your dog's soft palate may be irritated by:²

- Allergies
- Pulling on the leash (switch to a harness)
- Overexcitement
- Exercise intolerance
- A foreign body in the throat
- Nasal mites
- Eating or drinking
- A sudden change in temperature

If your dog is a habitual reverse sneezer, pay attention when it happens to try and pinpoint the triggers. My dog Rosco used to reverse sneeze whenever I opened my front door on a cold, winter day. Another one of my dogs reverse sneezes if she's woken up suddenly, so I try to not disturb her when she's asleep.

Your reaction to your dog's reverse sneeze also matters. Many dogs become anxious during a reverse sneeze. If you panic or become upset, it can make your dog panicked as well, so try your best to stay calm and let the episode pass.

Can Reverse Sneezing Be Diagnosed?

You likely won't need to see a veterinarian solely for an occasional reverse sneeze. And even if you did, the episode would be over before you got an appointment. But if you're not sure what's happening to your pet, try to get an episode on video. This can help your veterinarian determine if a reverse sneeze is to blame.

If, however, your dog has started doing it more and the episodes are progressing, a trip to your veterinarian is warranted to rule out a more serious underlying condition. Other factors that may lead to snorting noises similar to a reverse sneeze include:³

- Collapsing trachea
- Nasal tumor or polyps
- Nasal foreign body
- Upper respiratory tract infection

- Inflammation
- Chronic post-nasal drip

What to Do if Your Dog Is Reverse Sneezing

You don't have to do anything during a reverse sneezing episode, but since your dog may be frightened, you may want to speak to her calmly to reassure her that she's OK. If you want, you can also massage her throat gently to help the spasm.

Another trick is to briefly cover her nostrils with your fingers or gently blow in your dog's face. This will make her swallow, which can help clear the irritation and stop the reverse sneeze.

For a longer episode, you can also place your fingers on your dog's tongue and press down. This will cause her to open her mouth wide and help move air through her nose effectively, or cause her to swallow, which should stop the episode. Only put your fingers in your dog's mouth if you're sure she won't bite you.

In most cases, however, you don't need to intervene during a reverse sneeze. In fact, doing so may only cause your dog additional stress, so use your best judgement. Again, a reverse sneeze here in there is natural for dogs and nothing to be concerned about. Reverse sneezing in cats is much more rare, so if you have a kitty that's reverse sneezing, take her in to the vet to be checked for feline asthma or an upper respiratory infection.

Sources and References

^{1, 2, 3} [PetMD July 31, 2020](#)
