

Is Your Dog Always Starving? Find Out Why

Uncover the surprising reasons behind your dog's constant hunger. Whether it's a health issue or a dietary imbalance, knowing the cause can make all the difference.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- While it's common for dogs to have a hearty appetite and eat virtually any time food is offered, excessive hunger is not "normal"
- Serious medical conditions can trigger excessive hunger in dogs, so I recommend seeing a veterinarian if your pup seems to be unusually hungry
- Health conditions that may trigger excessive hunger include Cushing's disease, diabetes, hyperthyroidism and exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (EPI)
- If your dog is primarily eating kibble or another low-quality food full of biologically inappropriate grains, starches and fiber as an inexpensive filler, it's possible that nutrient deficiencies are to blame
- Past trauma causing your pet to view food as a resource he needs to hoard or a food obsession may also trigger your dog to constantly seek food

Is your dog always ravenous? Does she seem to rarely be full or satisfied after eating? While it's normal for dogs to have a hearty appetite and eat virtually any time food is offered, excessive hunger in dogs can be a sign of underlying illness.

When it comes to hunger in dogs, it's important to go back to their grey wolf ancestors. Remember, in the wild canines live a feast-or-famine lifestyle. With food only available when they can catch it, wolves may go for days without eating. This means that when it's mealtime, they'll also eat as much as they can — since they don't know when their next meal is coming.

Dogs, though domesticated, likely retain some of this instinct. If you have a rescue dog who wasn't fed regularly, it's also possible that memories of starvation may make him food obsessed. It's even possible for your dog to be eating normally but still feel hungry because she's not receiving the nutrients her body needs.

For these reasons — and because medical conditions can also trigger excessive hunger in dogs — I recommend seeing a veterinarian if your pup seems to be unusually hungry. Following are four potentially serious issues that need to be ruled out.

4 Health Conditions That Cause Excessive Hunger in Dogs

1. **Cushing's disease — Cushing's disease**, also known as hyperadrenocorticism, occurs when too much of the stress hormone cortisol is released by the adrenal glands. This condition occurs more often in terriers, poodles, dachshunds and the American Eskimo/spitz and can be caused by long-term use of steroids like prednisone.

A release of cortisol triggers a release of glucose from the liver, and extreme hunger is common in response to this excess glucose being burned.

Cushing's disease can also trigger other serious conditions, including elevated blood sugar that can lead to diabetes, elevated blood pressure that can result in heart and kidney diseases, thinning of the skin and coat, decreased muscle and bone mass, and increased risk of infection. Other symptoms of Cushing's include:

- Increased thirst and urination, which can lead to incontinence
- Bruising
- **Increased panting**
- Hair loss
- Abdominal weight gain (pot belly appearance), despite a reduction in calorie intake
- Irritability or restlessness
- Thinning skin and change of skin color from pink to grey or black, symmetrical flank hair loss
- Much less commonly, rear limb weakness and blood clots

2. **Type 2 diabetes** — Dogs with diabetes may always feel hungry because their cells aren't getting enough glucose. In fact, increased appetite may be one of the first signs of diabetes, along with excessive thirst and urination. Type 2 diabetes most often occurs in middle aged or older dogs who have decreased production of insulin or a diminished ability to use insulin efficiently.

If he develops diabetes, your pet will be hungrier than normal because the amino acids needed inside the cells aren't getting there or aren't being used appropriately. When the cells of the body are being starved of essential nutrients, the result is often an increase in appetite. But because the cells aren't using energy from food efficiently, your pet can lose weight even though he's taking in more calories.

The No. 1 reason pets develop diabetes is obesity, often caused by consuming a high-carbohydrate diet in combination with a sedentary lifestyle.

3. **Hyperthyroidism** — While this condition is rare in dogs — it's much **more common in cats** — it can happen, and when it does excessive hunger can result. In most cases, hyperthyroidism in dogs is caused by an aggressive thyroid tumor that overproduces thyroid hormone.

Very rarely, the ingestion of thyroid hormone from other sources, such as active thyroid tissue contained in raw diets that use poorly sourced raw ingredients. Thoughtfully sourced, formulated and tested raw food diets do not have this problem.

Endogenous hyperthyroidism from a tumor means the glands are working overtime, secreting too much hormone which causes a constant state of metabolic hyperactivity. This makes your pet want to eat all the time, drink excessive amounts of water and urinate excessively. Increased heart rate and vomiting can also

occur.

Left untreated, hyperthyroidism can result in heart and kidney failure, and your pet is likely to lose weight. Thankfully, this condition is exceptionally rare in dogs.

4. **Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency (EPI) — Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency, or EPI**, occurs when the pancreas doesn't produce enough digestive enzymes, including amylase to digest starch, lipase to digest fats and proteases to digest protein. As a result, your pet can't adequately digest its food and nutrients are poorly absorbed. German shepherds are at increased risk of EPI, but any dog can develop this condition.

In younger dogs, EPI may be caused by a decrease in the number of enzyme-producing cells in the pancreas, known as pancreatic acinar cell atrophy. In older dogs, EPI often results due to chronic pancreatitis. Dogs with EPI feel hungry constantly, but experience significant weight loss, no matter how much they eat. Other symptoms may include:

- Pooping more frequently, and the stools are very large with a yellowish or greyish color
- Coprophagia (**poop eating**) and/or pica (eating nonfood items)
- Noisy digestion and flatulence
- Intermittent watery diarrhea or vomiting

If a dog with EPI goes undiagnosed and untreated, her body from nose to tail is being deprived of the nutrients crucial for growth, renewal and maintenance. Ultimately, she'll either starve to death or die of organ failure. This condition can be diagnosed with a simple blood test.

Nutrient Deficiencies Can Also Cause Chronic Hunger

If your dog is eating a species-appropriate, fresh food diet, it's unlikely that her insatiable appetite is the result of malnourishment. However, if your dog is primarily eating a poorly formulated raw diet, unbalanced homemade diet or poor quality kibble full of biologically inappropriate grains, starches and fiber as an inexpensive filler, it's possible that nutrient deficiencies are to blame.

This is especially true if excessive high glycemic starch or fiber is replacing the protein your carnivorous dog needs, causing him to constantly search for more meat-based amino acids. While starch and fiber may temporarily fill up your dog, she needs sufficient meat protein to adequately sustain her biology.

Excessive 'Hunger' as a Learned Behavior

If you see your veterinarian and rule out underlying health conditions — and you're feeding a species-appropriate, fresh food diet — there may be a behavioral component involved. This could be due to past trauma causing your pet to view food as a resource he needs to hoard, obsessive compulsive disorder or a food obsession.

In this case, don't give in to the begging, as overfeeding your dog may lead to obesity. Instead, seek out positive reinforcement behavior training to get to the bottom of the issue.