

Is Your Pet Suffering From This Dangerous Condition?

Learn about the unexpected triggers that could affect your pet's health and discover the crucial steps you can take to prevent a life-threatening emergency that might strike without warning, ensuring your furry friend's well-being and longevity.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- When pancreatitis occurs, digestive enzymes in the pancreas activate and begin digest the pancreas, leading to inflammation, irritation and tissue damage
- Cooked, high-fat foods, such as bacon, poultry skin and gravy, can trigger pancreatitis if consumed in large enough quantity
- Processed pet food, which is devoid of natural enzymes that help reduce pancreatic stress, is also likely involved in pancreatitis
- There is no known cure for pancreatitis, so treatment involves supportive care focused on reducing the dog's symptoms
- Providing a rich source of digestive enzymes and minimizing consumption of cooked or oxidized fats is one of the most important steps you can take to prevent pancreatitis in your dog

Pancreatitis, or inflammation of the pancreas, can come on quickly or develop gradually over time. The pancreas produces digestive enzymes and the hormones insulin and glucagon. When pancreatitis occurs, digestive enzymes in the pancreas activate and begin digest the pancreas, leading to irritation and tissue damage.¹

Left untreated, the damage can spread to the liver and toxins may be released that circulate throughout the body, causing systemic inflammation. If the pancreas gets damaged enough, it will interfere with the production of the hormone insulin, leading to diabetes.

Acute pancreatitis is a veterinary emergency that's fatal in 27% to 58% of dogs.² Fortunately, supportive care can lead to a full recovery and, even better, this is often a preventable disease.

Common Causes of Pancreatitis in Dogs

Genetics are thought to play a role in pancreatitis, with certain breeds — such as miniature schnauzers, miniature poodles, cocker spaniels and some terriers — at an increased risk.³ However, a common cause is dogs getting ahold of high-fat foods from a garbage can or left out on your kitchen counter.

High-fat foods, such as bacon, poultry skin and gravy, can trigger pancreatitis if consumed in large enough quantity. But there appears to be a distinction between types of fat, with high-quality raw fats not leading to pancreatitis even in high amounts the way cooked fat does, sometimes even in small quantities.

Kibble is sprayed with a fatty palatant, which affects the pancreas — many pets have chronic pancreatitis from consuming damaged and rancid fats in their ultraprocesed pet foods. The high-heat processing of dry food also creates unwanted chemical byproducts that have been linked to pancreatitis.⁴

Adding to the problem, processed pet food is devoid of lipase, the enzyme needed to process fat, which is why I suspect the pancreas of many pets exists in a state of chronic, low-grade inflammation. Other pancreatitis triggers include:⁵

- Certain drugs, including anti-seizure medications such as potassium bromide or phenobarbital, prednisone and other catabolic steroids, and the diuretic Lasix
- Reflux or blockage of the pancreas' enzyme ducts
- Hormonal imbalances, such as diabetes or hypothyroidism
- High calcium levels
- Trauma to the pancreas

Signs of Canine Pancreatitis

The most common acute pancreatitis symptoms include:⁶

- Loss of appetite
- Nausea, which may appear as excessive drooling and lip-licking
- Abdominal pain
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Fever
- Depression
- A praying position, which looks similar to a play bow

Chronic pancreatitis can be more difficult to pinpoint, as it can cause symptoms similar to those caused by many other conditions. When the disease is very severe, inflammation can become systemic, which can cause shock or cardiovascular (circulatory) collapse.

Historically, veterinarians have diagnosed pancreatitis using a blood test called the PLI (pancreatic lipase immunoreactivity). More recently, Texas A&M University developed a test for canine pancreatic-specific immunoreactivity called the Spec cPL test. Results are typically run overnight, and the test detects pancreatitis in 83% of cases while excluding other potential diseases 98% of the time.⁷

There's also now a cPL test that offers results almost immediately at the vet clinic, without the need to ship the sample to an outside lab. Ultrasound is also sometimes used to diagnose pancreatitis and can also offer a glimpse of nearby organs or spot a tumor near the pancreas, which sometimes accompanies pancreatitis.⁸

How Is Pancreatitis in Dogs Treated?

There is no known cure for pancreatitis. Rather, treatment involves supportive care focused on reducing the dog's symptoms. Supportive therapy includes:

- Intravenous (IV) fluids to address dehydration, hypovolemia (decreased blood volume) and electrolyte imbalances
- Pain management
- Anti-emetics to alleviate nausea and vomiting
- Enteral nutrition (tube feeding)

While antibiotics are often offered by conventional veterinarians for pancreatitis, in most cases they are unnecessary and unhelpful. In addition, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and steroid medications like prednisone should be avoided. In dogs with coexisting conditions such as diabetes, successful treatment of pancreatitis depends on successful treatment or management of those other disorders.

A low-fat, low-residue diet made with human-grade ingredients should be instituted until the condition has resolved. In some dogs, the condition resolves in a few days, while in others an acute bout of pancreatitis may lead to a chronic problem. Some dogs also suffer from recurrences of acute pancreatitis.

Can Pancreatitis Be Prevented?

Dogs and cats are designed to get supplemental enzymes from the foods they consume, since their ancestral diet is loaded with living foods (prey) that contain abundant enzymes. In the wild, dogs and cats consume fresh pancreatic tissue, which is abundant in naturally occurring enzymes. Enzymes are heat-sensitive, so they are inactivated when food is adulterated.

Feeding a nutritionally balanced, species-appropriate, fresh food diet is important to support the health of the pancreas. However, even dogs eating raw diets typically don't consume pancreatic tissue, and because of this, many pets eating fresh food diets are enzyme deficient.

Providing a rich source of **digestive enzymes**, either through feeding pancreatic tissue (which is unappealing to most pet parents, and can be difficult to source) or a digestive enzyme supplement, is one of the most important steps you can take to prevent pancreatitis in your dog.

This is beneficial for virtually all dogs but is especially important if your dog is currently dealing with chronic pancreatitis or had acute pancreatitis in the past. By simply adding digestive enzymes to your dog's fresh food meals, you'll reduce stress on the pancreas and support optimal health.

Sources and References

^{1,3,5,6,7,8} [The Wildest](#) November 21, 2023

² [Topics in Companion Animal Medicine](#). (27)3:123-132 August 2012

⁴ [The Journal of Immunology](#) May 15, 2016
