

Revealing the Quiet Threat Inside Your Dog's Gut

Learn to recognize the subtle hints of a serious health concern for your furry companion.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Bloat, or gastric dilatation and volvulus (GDV), is a life-threatening, extremely painful condition that requires immediate veterinary attention
- Bloat involves two main components: the stomach filling with gas, fluid or food and then twisting upon itself (volvulus)
- The twisting action cuts off the stomach's blood supply and blocks the pathways where the contents of the stomach would normally be expelled, leading to a rapid buildup of pressure
- In the early stages, bloat can be easy to miss; your dog may seem anxious or restless, or may pant or drool more than normal
- Signs of full GDV include a swollen abdomen, pain, dry heaving and rapid heartbeat; GDV requires surgery for treatment, so get to an emergency vet at the first sign of bloat

Bloat, or gastric dilatation and volvulus (GDV), is a life-threatening, extremely painful condition that requires immediate veterinary attention. Bloat involves two main components: the stomach filling with gas, fluid or food — this is the gastric dilatation component — and then twisting upon itself (volvulus).

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Signs of Bloat Every Dog Owner Should Be Aware Of

Knowing signs of bloat is crucial for pet owners, as without immediate treatment, death can occur in just a few hours. During this medical emergency, toxins are released into the bloodstream and blood flow back to the heart is compromised. This can put your dog in a state of shock in as little as 20 minutes to an hour after the volvulus develops.

However, in the early stages, bloat can be easy to miss. Your dog may seem anxious or restless, or she may pace. She may stand and stretch, or nip at or guard her abdomen. Panting and drooling are also common. If your dog has simple bloat, she should be able to relieve the pressure by belching.

But if the bloat has caused a volvulus, the gas can't be expelled because both the entry and exit to the stomach are pinched shut. Signs your dog is suffering from GDV include:

- A distended or noticeably swollen abdomen

- Pacing and restlessness
- Drooling more than usual
- Attempting to vomit, belch or retch without producing anything (dry heaving)
- Signs of pain such as whining or groaning when their abdomen is touched
- Rapid heartbeat
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing

If your dog's stomach is twisted, circulation to the area is lost and the tissues will begin to die. In severe cases, the stomach can rupture. Full GDV requires surgery for treatment, so get to an emergency veterinary clinic at the first signs of bloat. Fortunately, most dogs who undergo surgery for GDV survive.

And, if caught early enough, your vet may even be able to relieve the buildup of gas by inserting a tube into your dog's stomach.¹ If possible, administer homeopathic Belladonna, Nux Vomica, or Carbo Veg (depending on your dog's specific symptoms) on the way to the vet to try to mitigate rapid progression of the emergency.

Dog Breeds Most at Risk of Bloat

While any dog can develop bloat, it's most common in large breeds with deep chests. In a study of 77,088 dogs visiting veterinary clinics with symptoms of bloat, certain purebred dogs had a much higher chance of getting bloat compared to mixed-breed dogs.²

Great Danes had the highest risk, while Akitas and Dogue de Bordeaux were also at very high risk. Other dog breeds more likely to develop bloat include:

- Great Dane
- Doberman Pinscher
- Irish Setter
- Newfoundland
- Basset Hound
- Weimaraner
- German Shorthaired Pointer
- Standard Poodle
- Saint Bernard
- Old English Sheepdog
- Gordon Setter
- German Shepherd

What Else Increases the Risk of Bloat?

The study also found that the risk of bloat increases as dogs get older, up to age 12, and neutered male dogs were slightly more likely to get bloat than female dogs who had not been spayed. Many GDV dogs have relatives that have had the condition, suggesting it may be partially genetic.

Eating large meals quickly, which allows dogs to ingest excess air with their meal, drinking large volumes of water after eating and exercising vigorously after meals can increase the risk. Other potential causes of bloat include:

- Using elevated feeding bowls with rapid eaters, which encourages ingestion of excess air with the meal
- Feeding dry food with heavy soybean fat or oil content
- Feeding your dog one large meal instead of multiple smaller meals

There's also likely a nutritional component, as dogs don't develop bloat while eating a nutritionally complete raw food diet. Many other fresh-feeding veterinarians have similar experiences. Further, research shows dogs fed primarily kibble are at significantly increased risk for GDV,⁴ as are dogs who swallow indigestible or slow-to-digest foreign bodies, usually as a result of indiscriminate eating.⁵

Other suspected risk factors include increased gastrin concentration (gastrin is a hormone that controls release of acid in the stomach); decreased stomach motility and delayed gastric emptying (meaning food stays in the stomach longer than normal); and removal of the spleen.

Lack of adequate hydrochloric acid production is a significant problem with pets fed carb-based, ultraprocessed diets that result in gastroesophageal reflux (GERD) and a host of other GI symptoms. Without adequate stomach acid production, food stays in the stomach too long, increasing the likelihood of gas production and bloat.

Tips to Reduce Your Dog's Risk of GDV

If your dog is at high risk of bloat, your veterinarian may recommend a surgical procedure called gastropexy to prevent GDV. It involves attaching the stomach to the abdominal wall to prevent the stomach from twisting, which is the most dangerous aspect of bloat. Thankfully this procedure can be done laparoscopically, so it's less invasive.

While it may be useful in some dogs, particularly breeds prone to the condition with a parent, sibling or offspring who has had GDV, the first recommendation would be to try to lower the likelihood of GDV by making lifestyle choices that reduce risks. This includes:

- Feed a nutritionally balanced, meat-based fresh food diet and minimize grains or other refined, high-glycemic, fermentable sources of starch (eliminate corn, wheat, rice and other starchy flours and meals). Make sure you choose meat-based, limited-ingredient treats or use fresh foods as treats.
- Feed multiple smaller meals a day within your dog's eating window instead of one large meal, especially if your dog is a gulper.
- Reduce the amount of air your dog swallows at meal times by slowing the speed at which he eats. Offer food from a special slow-feeding bowl like the Brake-Fast, or spread food out on a baking sheet, muffin tin or a lick mat. If your pup is inhaling their meal, consider using their food for training rewards, offering small, controlled bites over several training sessions during their eating window.

- Make sure the food you're feeding is "clean" (contains no preservatives, dyes, emulsifiers, flavorings, genetically modified (GM) ingredients, or citric acid), and always add supplemental digestive enzymes to assist in digestion and assimilation of food.
- Don't vigorously exercise your dog for an hour after he eats, and don't allow him to drink large amounts of water during that time. Never restrict water prior to meals.
- Be very careful not to allow your dog to have recreational bones or chews, toys or other foreign objects that are difficult or impossible to digest or encourage excessive gulping or swallowing of air.
- Minimize stress on your dog. Make sure she's well exercised (though not right after meals, as discussed). Most large breed dogs need lots of daily physical activity to maintain muscle tone and range of motion, decrease cortisol (stress hormone) levels and relieve boredom.
- Limit the amount of chemicals your pet is exposed to orally, topically and in the environment.

Sources and References

^{1,3} [Whole Dog Journal February 9, 2024](#)

² [Journal of Small Animal Practice August 21, 2017](#)

⁴ [Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, June 15, 2012, Vol. 240, No. 12, Pages 1456-1462](#)

⁵ [Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, November 1, 2012, Vol. 241, No. 9, Pages 1190-1193](#)
