

Does Your Dog Suffer from This Overlooked Condition?

If you notice unusual swelling on your dog's neck, mouth, or face, don't wait to check it — it could be this condition. It's initially painless but can ultimately worsen and lead to discomfort. Here are ways to treat it.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If you notice a soft, painless swelling on your dog's neck, jaw, or near the eye, it could be a salivary mucocele. Early treatment prevents complications
- Salivary mucoceles form when saliva leaks from a damaged gland or duct, leading to swelling. Trauma, tight collars, and sharp objects are common triggers
- Depending on location, mucoceles can cause eating, swallowing, or breathing difficulties. In severe cases, airway obstruction may require emergency care
- Vets confirm the diagnosis through physical exams and fluid tests. Surgery is the best treatment, removing the damaged gland to prevent future leakage
- Most dogs recover fully after surgery. Proper wound care, medication, and rest help prevent complications and ensure a smooth healing process

Salivary mucocele is a fluid-filled swelling that happens when saliva leaks from a damaged gland or duct and collects in the surrounding tissue.¹ While it may not always cause pain, it can interfere with your pet's day-to-day activities, such as eating, breathing, and overall comfort. Knowing what to look for and understanding treatment options can help you make the best decision for your pet's health.

What Are Salivary Mucoceles and How Do They Form?

Salivary mucoceles are different from cysts or tumors because they do not have their own lining.² Instead, they form when saliva escapes from the salivary gland or duct and accumulates in the tissues, triggering irritation. Over time, the trapped saliva leads to swelling, which can vary in size.

In most cases, salivary mucocele isn't life-threatening, but due to the discomfort and possibility of causing complications, you will need to seek veterinary care to address this problem. There are cases wherein the condition resolves independently, though many require medical intervention to heal fully.

A salivary mucocele is usually soft and painless, but as it grows, it can make it difficult for your dog to eat or breathe properly. Seeking veterinary advice as soon as possible can help you manage the condition before it becomes severe.

What Are the Different Types of Salivary Mucocele?

Not all salivary mucoceles are the same. They can develop in different areas of your dog's mouth and neck, leading to different symptoms. Here are the four different types:

- **Cervical mucocele** — This is the most common type, and it appears as a swelling in the neck, usually under the jaw. This type tends to be the easiest to notice because the swelling is visible and often grows slowly.
- **Sublingual mucocele (ranula)** — It forms below or alongside the tongue. This can be more problematic because it may interfere with eating and swallowing. If the swelling gets too large, it can also be injured during meals, leading to bleeding. Your dog may show signs of discomfort while chewing or may avoid eating altogether.³
- **Pharyngeal mucocele** appears as swelling in the throat,⁴ making it one of the more serious forms of this condition. Because the swelling happens deep in the mouth, it is not always easy to see. Instead, you may notice your dog struggling to swallow or breathe. In extreme cases, the swelling can block the airway, making emergency treatment necessary.⁵
- **Zygomatic mucocele** is the rarest type that develops near your pet's eye. It can cause a visible bulge in the cheek area below the eye and may even affect your dog's vision.⁶ While this form is uncommon, it still requires veterinary attention to prevent complications.

Each type of salivary mucocele has its challenges, but the good news is that effective treatment options are available.

What Causes Salivary Mucocele?

The exact cause of a salivary mucocele is not always clear, but most cases are linked to some form of trauma. Dogs that chew on sharp objects, experience bite wounds, or wear tight collars that press on the neck may be at greater risk. Even sudden jerks on a leash can stretch the salivary duct enough to cause damage.⁷ When this happens, saliva leaks into the tissue, leading to irritation and swelling.

Salivary mucocele primarily affects dogs and rarely occurs in cats. Some breeds are more likely to develop salivary mucoceles than others. German Shepherds, Poodles, and Dachshunds are breeds with a higher risk. However, any dog can develop this condition, regardless of age or size. Because the swelling can take time to appear, the initial injury might go unnoticed.⁸

An underlying infection or inflammation can sometimes weaken the salivary gland, making it more prone to leaks. While infections are not a common cause, they can make the condition worse by increasing swelling and discomfort. If an infection occurs, your vet may recommend antibiotics as part of the treatment plan.

Although salivary mucoceles are rare in cats, they can still occur. If you notice similar swelling in your cat, it's important to have them examined by a veterinarian to determine the cause. Regardless of the animal, early intervention is always the best approach to prevent complications.

Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms

One of the most noticeable signs of a salivary mucocele is a soft, swollen mouth, neck, or jaw lump. It starts as painless but can progress and increase in size, leading to discomfort. The swelling manifests depending on the type of mucocele that forms. Other symptoms include:

- Difficulty eating or swallowing
- Excessive drooling
- Breathing problems (if swelling is in the throat)
- Bulging eye or vision issues (if swelling is near the eye)

Diagnosis and Treatment Options

If you suspect your dog has a salivary mucocele, take them to the vet for a physical examination. The vet will check for swelling, gently press on the affected area, and ask about any recent injuries.

Veterinarians will use a fine needle to collect fluid from the swelling to confirm the diagnosis. The sample will be examined to rule out infections, tumors, or other possible causes.

In some cases, imaging tests like an ultrasound or CT scan may be needed to get a clearer picture of the affected gland.⁹ These can help identify the exact location of the mucocele and determine whether surgery is necessary. Because some mucoceles can be tricky to locate, advanced imaging may be the best way to plan an effective treatment.

Surgery is the most reliable treatment for salivary mucoceles. The affected salivary gland is removed during the procedure to prevent further leakage. If a mucocele develops under the tongue, the veterinarian may use marsupialization to create a small opening, allowing saliva to drain naturally. While surgery can sound intimidating, it is highly effective, and most dogs recover well with proper care.¹⁰

Some veterinarians may recommend draining the mucocele instead of surgery for mild cases. However, this is usually a temporary solution, as the swelling often returns.¹¹ If your dog has repeated problems with salivary mucoceles, surgery is usually the most viable way to ensure the condition doesn't recur.

Helping Your Dog Recover

Most dogs recover fully after treatment and live happy lives every day. Since dogs have multiple salivary glands, removing one or two does not affect their ability to produce saliva. Once the problem gland is gone, the risk of recurrence is very low.

However, your pet will need some time to heal after surgery. You'll need to clean the surgical site and apply warm compresses to help reduce swelling. If there's a drain on the surgical site, you may see drainage for a few days. If you bandage it, replace the bandages regularly to prevent infections. Most dogs must also wear a cone to prevent them from scratching or licking the area. Don't worry — your vet will give you instructions on how to care for your pet.

Your veterinarian may prescribe pain medication and antibiotics to keep your dog comfortable and prevent infection.¹² Follow your vet's instructions carefully and complete the entire course of any medication. Proper aftercare will help your dog heal faster and prevent complications.

Sources and References

^{1,4,6,7,10,12} [VCA Animal Hospitals, Salivary Mucocele](#)

^{2,9,11} [Dr. Loudon, Salivary Mucocele: A Common, Overlooked Cause of Neck Swelling in Dogs](#)

^{3,5,8} [ACVS, Salivary Mucocele](#)