

What You Need to Know About Pets' Tummy Woes

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS

Pets' digestive issues can be messy, gross, disruptive, and even scary, signifying everything from minor bugs to serious conditions. Get to know which signs of digestive problems in dogs and cats are simply unpleasant—and which mean you should get veterinary help.

Signs the Digestive Tract Is Off Track—and What They Might Mean

Digestive issues show themselves in lots of ways, including:

- Constipation and straining
- Gas or bloating
- Diarrhea
- Blood or mucus in stool
- Dark or tarry stool
- Vomiting
- Foreign objects in vomit or stool
- Changes in appetite, bathroom habits, or behavior
- Signs of pain or discomfort

These signs can be *chronic*, or ongoing, or *acute*, meaning they began suddenly.

Many different diseases, gastrointestinal (GI) issues, and other conditions can lead to these signs, including:

- Infectious diseases, such as viruses like distemper and parvovirus
- Intestinal parasites
- Inflammatory conditions like *gastritis* (inflammation of the stomach's lining), *gastroenteritis* (stomach and intestinal inflammation), *colitis* (inflammation of the colon, or large intestine), and *inflammatory bowel disease* (an umbrella term for chronic inflammatory GI conditions)
- Stomach ulcers
- Malabsorption
- Pancreatitis

- Gastric dilatation and volvulus (bloat) in dogs
- Intestinal blockages
- Ingestion of toxic substances
- Dietary indiscretion or food-related causes, including food sensitivity and food intolerance
- Stress, anxiety, and other health conditions or diseases, such as cancer, which can also cause or show up as digestive issues

Luckily, you don't have to be an expert diagnostician yourself—your vet will help determine the cause.

If your pet has ingested something toxic, you can call the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at 888-426-4435 or the Pet Poison Helpline at 855-764-7661 (a fee will be charged).

When to Get Help

Knowing in advance when to seek emergency help versus scheduling an appointment with your vet can prevent unnecessary suffering and potentially save your pet's life.

Get emergency help if your pet suddenly experiences severe symptoms of GI distress. Vomiting blood or having an excessive amount of it in stool is also an emergency.

Quick intervention is typically needed if your pet has an obstruction, or “traffic jam” causing an intestinal blockage, according to Dr. Sue Yee Lim, a small animal internal medicine resident and PhD candidate at the



Gastrointestinal Laboratory at Texas A&M University.

Pets might also need emergency care when treatment isn't working—for instance, if your pet keeps vomiting despite taking anti-vomiting meds, known as *antiemetics*. In such a case, the diagnosis may be different or more complex than originally thought, or additional treatment may be needed.

Call your vet's office if your pet is acting normal but shows minor symptoms like soft feces or mild diarrhea. Veterinary staff can offer advice for modifying your pet's diet and other home remedies. If symptoms don't improve after a few days, schedule an appointment. “Anything that is chronic really needs medical attention,” Dr. Lim advises.

Always seek emergency care if your pet rapidly gets worse.

Diagnosis

First, veterinary staff will take your pet's history. Mention if your pet might have gotten into any foods, drugs, or objects they shouldn't have.

After getting all relevant information from you, your veterinarian will perform a physical exam. “We pay extra attention

to if our patient is painful,” Dr. Lim says, especially while palpating, or feeling, the abdomen.

Your vet might perform diagnostic tests and order additional tests, some of which could require going to a specialty hospital. Examples of tests include:

- Fecal exam
- Urinalysis
- Blood work
- Radiographs/abdominal x-rays
- Endoscopy
- Biopsy

Chronic issues often require more extensive testing to determine the cause. “The more chronic a problem is, the more we will work it up,” Dr. Lim says. “If the GI signs have been going on for a long time, we will definitely be recommending more diagnostics.”

Treatment

Once your veterinarian makes a diagnosis, they’ll recommend a treatment plan.

Options for treating GI troubles are as diverse as their potential causes.

With your vet’s guidance, you can manage many minor digestive issues at home through dietary restrictions. Bland diets for dogs usually consist of a carb (cooked potato or rice, for example) and a protein (such as boiled, skinless chicken or turkey breast). “Only [feed a bland diet] for a few days because it’s not balanced,” Dr. Lim says. If your dog’s symptoms haven’t resolved by then, check with your vet for next steps. “I don’t recommend a home-cooked diet for cats because you can’t make sure it’s balanced,” adds Dr. Lim. So, for cats—and for long-term diet changes in dogs—your vet might prescribe an easily digestible GI diet.

Other common treatments for GI issues may include:

- Therapeutic food
- Probiotics
- Fiber and other supplements

- Antibiotics
- Antiemetics
- Dewormers
- Steroids
- Intravenous (IV) fluids or drugs
- Hospitalization or surgery for complicated cases

If your vet diagnoses a more complex illness, that underlying issue will need to be treated as well.

Prevention

The keys to safeguarding pets’ digestive health include feeding a veterinarian-recommended diet, staying up-to-date on vaccines and preventives, pet-proofing your house, and getting your pet regular veterinary care. As Dr. Lim says, “Prevention is always better than cure.”

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THE SCOOP ON POOP

You could probably admire your pet’s cuteness all day, but chances are you’re less inclined to gaze at their poop. By not regularly checking it, though, you might miss some important clues about their digestive health—and beyond. Pets’ poop can reveal signs of digestion moving too slow or too fast; the presence of bacteria, viruses, or parasites; and other health conditions.

The 4 Cs

The perfect poop should follow what vets call “the 4 Cs”:

- **Color**—Ideally, your pet’s poop is chocolatey brown. Tell your vet if it is light yellow or the color of clay, black or tarry, or streaked with bright red.
- **Consistency**—Poop should be firm, like the consistency of Play-Doh. Vets rate consistency from 1 (very

hard pellets) to 7 (liquid), with the ideal poop being a 2.

- **Coating**—You want no coating on your pet’s poop. Mucus or persistent red streaks should prompt a call to your vet.
- **Contents**—Your pet’s poop can reveal foreign objects, grass, hair clumps, and some obvious signs of parasites, which might look like white rice or spaghetti.

Straying from the ideals of the 4 Cs is OK once in a while. Some variations, like temporary color changes (especially if they’re related to your pet’s diet) or a single watery bowel movement, aren’t necessarily cause for immediate concern.

When to Call Your Vet

Sometimes your pet’s poop is trying



Because poop offers such fascinating insight into pets’ health, bringing a fresh sample to your pet’s wellness exams is essential.

to warn you that something is amiss. If abnormal poop happens more than twice or persists for more than a day, give your vet a call. Call right away if your pet loses a noticeable amount of blood or if their behavior or eating habits change significantly.