

# Gastroenteritis: Acute, Nonspecific

## ABOUT THE DIAGNOSIS

Acute nonspecific gastroenteritis refers to indigestion of sudden onset. It is a very common, often harmless problem of dogs and cats and it has many possible causes. Some of the most frequent reasons for acute nonspecific gastroenteritis are a change in diet to a new brand or type of food; dietary indiscretion (pet eats something he or she shouldn't); mild gastrointestinal virus infections (like intestinal flu-like conditions in people); intestinal bacterial overgrowth or imbalance ("dysbiosis"); stress, such as boarding (typically diarrhea without vomiting); and reaction to medication. Often the exact cause is never known by the time the symptoms resolve. A veterinarian usually makes the diagnosis of acute nonspecific gastroenteritis based on symptoms you describe, and a pet that has normal vital signs and an otherwise unremarkable physical exam. The most common symptoms of acute nonspecific gastroenteritis are vomiting and/or diarrhea. Many times, the required treatment for acute nonspecific gastroenteritis is minimal, if any, but occasionally a dog or cat may lose sufficient fluid that weakness, dehydration, and loss of appetite occur and in such cases hospitalization is necessary for treatment.

Acute nonspecific gastroenteritis is a type of digestive upset of unproven origin. It is a diagnosis of exclusion, meaning that the veterinarian can conclude that a dog or cat has acute nonspecific gastroenteritis only after considering other more serious causes of the symptoms and often performing tests to evaluate and eliminate the most significant other likely possibilities. Acute nonspecific gastritis is usually a mild, self-limiting form of stomach upset that improves on its own after 24 to 48 hours.

**Gastroenteritis:** This is an umbrella term that refers to inflammation of the stomach and intestine of any origin. Some typical identifiable causes of gastroenteritis should be considered before a presumptive diagnosis of acute nonspecific gastroenteritis is reached. Foreign materials (plastic toys, bones, cloth) can block the digestive tract, like a cork in a bottle. Even without obstruction, certain foreign bodies can cause gastroenteritis. Intestinal viral infections that are severe, like parvovirus in dogs, may cause a critical degree of gastroenteritis that requires intensive care in most cases; a specific test (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay, ELISA) performed on the feces can confirm or rule out parvovirus. Chemicals of many varieties can cause gastroenteritis, including household cleaners, soaps, and detergents, but also prescribed and over-the-counter drugs. Even some foods that we enjoy can cause gastroenteritis in our pets, which is why table scraps should not be fed to pets. Bacterial gastroenteritis can occur if pets eat old, stale, or rotting foods. Inflammation or disease of other abdominal organs can cause a sudden onset of gastrointestinal upset; your veterinarian will consider conditions such as pancreatitis, kidney disease, or liver disease if your pet does not improve soon, or if she/he seems to be sicker than expected for simple gastroenteritis.

**Colitis:** Colitis is inflammation of the colon, which is a common cause for diarrhea that contains mucus or blood and causes much straining and urgency of defecation. Because most substances pass through the entire gastrointestinal tract, colitis may be part of an inflammatory process affecting the whole digestive tract (producing both vomiting and diarrhea), or it may occur on its own, causing diarrhea as just described. Stress (of boarding, of having new pets in the house, of moving, etc.) can cause a primary colitis and associated diarrhea, a condition often referred to as "nervous bowel."

Another cause of colitis is the proliferation of certain bacteria or protozoa in the colon.

Gastroenteritis and colitis should resolve with appropriate treatment and removal of inciting causes. With acute, nonspecific gastroenteritis, treatment is only implemented if complications such as dehydration are present, if the pet is experiencing discomfort, or if you are concerned that the symptoms appear to be more severe at home than what is apparent at the time of examination. Ongoing monitoring and in-hospital tests are recommended and performed as necessary, and no two cases require exactly the same veterinary care. If symptoms recur, your veterinarian should follow up with additional testing to look for underlying causes because there are many diseases that will cause symptoms similar to those of acute nonspecific gastroenteritis but are completely different, are not self-terminating (the problem worsens over hours or days, rather than improving), and therefore require various types of specific treatment.

## LIVING WITH THE DIAGNOSIS

Short-term care of pets with acute nonspecific gastroenteritis revolves around stopping the vomiting and/or diarrhea and preventing secondary effects of this loss of fluid and nutrients. Secondary effects include appetite loss, dehydration, and changes in blood electrolyte levels. These symptoms in and of themselves can become life-threatening, which occurs in a minority of patients with acute nonspecific gastroenteritis; your veterinarian will be able to tell you whether your pet appears to have a mild case or a severe case based on vital signs, evidence of dehydration, and so on. With appropriate supportive care, even the most serious cases of acute nonspecific gastroenteritis can generally be cured.

Medications should be discussed with your veterinarian and will be prescribed as appropriate. Hydration and electrolyte balance are easily managed if your pet is still eating and drinking. However, vomiting can cause sufficient irritation to the stomach (gastritis) that even water can become irritating to the stomach. Never offer anything by mouth less than 1 hour following vomiting unless instructed to do so by your veterinarian. Discuss appropriate drinking and refeeding with your veterinarian based on severity of symptoms.

Symptoms can be so severe that pets need to receive fluids intravenously (IV) to maintain adequate hydration and electrolyte balance. This can provide the stomach and intestinal tract enough time to heal and the inflammation to improve or resolve without worrying about life-threatening dehydration.

Cleanliness and hygiene are a critical issue. Pets that feel sick, vomit, and have diarrhea may not take care of their normal elimination (defecating, urinating). Getting vomit, diarrhea, and/or urine in their haircoat and on their skin can cause skin inflammation/irritation, infection, and severe secondary problems. Helping them keep clean is an important part of preventing worsening problems and allowing healing, as well as reducing the risk of contagion to humans: many causes of vomiting and diarrhea in pets can be transmitted to people, especially people without adequately functioning immune systems (babies, elderly people, people receiving chemotherapy or who have HIV/AIDS). Therefore, be sure to observe strict hygiene conditions including wearing gloves if cleaning up diarrhea or vomit, washing hands afterwards before touching anything else, and avoiding contact between your face and the pet's face or haircoat.

Long-term care is minimal, because acute nonspecific gastroenteritis is a self-resolving problem that should not require treatment for more than 48 hours. If a pet's symptoms have not

dramatically improved or fully resolved by 48 hours, either it is an unusually severe case (that may require another 24 hours for the pet to fully recover) or a different, more serious cause is to blame and should be sought out. An important aspect of aftercare for acute nonspecific gastroenteritis is prevention. In hindsight, it may be apparent to you that there was an identifiable cause for the symptoms: garbage or food that you later discover your pet got into, a foreign body that passes in the feces one or two days later, or a family member who later mentions that he/she gave the pet a bone or other inappropriate snack—these are common situations and they offer the opportunity to avoid repetition, since the pet has shown the symptoms that occur as a consequence. Some pets truly have “sensitive stomachs” and the smallest changes in diet can cause acute nonspecific gastroenteritis.

## TREATMENT

The most important immediate treatment is resting the intestinal tract. In pets with acute nonspecific gastroenteritis, it is important that you do not give anything for at least 1 hour following vomiting: remove the food and water bowls. Your pet may not otherwise know to avoid eating or drinking. Intestinal rest may be 1 or 2 hours or up to a full day, depending on your veterinarian’s assessment of the severity of symptoms and any abnormalities on physical examination. Discuss what appropriate treatment means for your pet with your veterinarian. For most pets that otherwise act as if they feel well, a short period or rest is often adequate.

Resuming feeding should be done with an appropriate bland and easily digestible diet that is low in fat. There are several prescription diets that your veterinarian may recommend. A lean cooked poultry protein source (such as broiled chicken with the skin removed) mixed with cooked white rice is often a palatable bland diet that is also low in fat. This can be a good short-term diet, but it is deficient in vitamins and minerals and should not be fed alone for more than a few days.

There is a variety of oral gastrointestinal protective drugs (antinausea drugs, antacids, intestinal antiinflammatory drugs, and antibiotics), any of which may be appropriate depending on symptoms. More intensive treatments such as intravenous fluids, and intravenous medication may be recommended by your veterinarian in specific instances of severe cases of gastroenteritis, especially if a serious underlying cause such as poisoning is suspected.

## DOs

- Resume feeding slowly; feed a bland diet in small, frequent amounts, such as 1/8 of a normal helping every 6 hours for the first two days. This will mean the daily total is 1/2 of the normal amount, which is appropriate even if it means feeding a very small amount per meal. This approach avoids filling or stretching the gastrointestinal tract, and helps with intestinal healing as a result. If this bland diet is well-tolerated (good appetite, no vomiting), then you can gradually reintroduce the regular diet, and normal meal size, over the next few days: be sure to do so in increments, such as having each meal contain 3/4 of the bland diet and 1/4 of the regular diet for 1-2 days, then 1/2 bland diet and 1/2 regular diet for 1-2 days, then 3/4-1/4, and finally all regular diet. If vomiting or diarrhea recurs at any point, you should contact your veterinarian to determine whether the bland diet feeding process simply needs to restart, or whether a more serious condition might be present (i.e., whether a recheck and possibly further tests and treatments might be warranted).
- Rest and recovery are essential during the healing stage of gastroenteritis. Still, be aware of the difference between resting and being lethargic. Resting means sleeping more than usual

and not being as active as normal, but still as responsive to you as usual—that is, as quick to respond to your call or touch as normal, as quick to stand and walk, but just with less stamina. This is in contrast to lethargy, which implies sluggish response to your call or touch, weakness, difficulty rising or complete inability to stand, and other signs of feeling profoundly unwell. If you see lethargy or these other types of symptoms, then complications could be starting and you should contact your veterinarian.

- Be sure your pet has access to clean uncontaminated water at all times, to prevent dehydration. If your pet drinks a large amount of water at once and then vomits it immediately, however, prevent overstretching of the stomach with water by offering a cup of water at a time, at least 15 minutes apart. Or give ice cubes instead of water, so they melt gradually in the bowl and provide water in a “delayed release” manner.
- Administer medications as directed by your veterinarian. Your veterinarian can also help guide refeeding and prevention based on the symptoms of your pet.
- Realize that medical tests like x-rays and bloodwork are necessary to eliminate underlying and more severe disease processes before arriving at a diagnosis of acute nonspecific gastroenteritis.

## DON'Ts

- Do not feed treats during recovery. Most treats are rich and not easily digested even in good health.
- Do not continue to feed a bland diet longer than necessary, particularly if you are home-cooking the diet for your dog or cat. Your pet needs a balanced diet with appropriate vitamins and minerals.
- Do not give medications longer than originally recommended, unless otherwise directed by your veterinarian. Even simple antacids can cause problems, if given for too long. Long-term medications may be necessary in more severe disease processes, but only under the guidance of your veterinarian. If your pet has a return of symptoms after you stop medications, the medications should be reevaluated by a veterinarian as there may be a more significant underlying disease.

## WHEN TO CALL YOUR VETERINARIAN

- Recurrence of symptoms, such as if your pet starts vomiting or having diarrhea again the days or weeks after you stop giving medications, warrant a call and possibly a recheck visit. Your veterinarian may refill a prescription, or they may recommend further testing, depending on the symptoms.
- Any worsening of symptoms (for example, if your pet continues vomiting despite being treated as described above) or appearance of new signs (for example, if in addition to vomiting, your dog or cat now seems lethargic). These can be additional warning signs of an underlying disease that is more serious than acute nonspecific gastroenteritis.
- Bloody vomit or blood in the intestinal tract (see descriptions below) are sometimes signs of worsening problems, but the significance of fresh blood in the stool can easily be overinterpreted and is not a reason for panic. Be sure to mention it to your vet, as fresh blood in the stool suggests that the problem is at the level of the colon, and in turn, this knowledge can guide which treatments to use.

## SIGNS TO WATCH FOR

As signs of onset (or recurrence) of acute nonspecific gastroenteritis:

- Vomiting, diarrhea, etc.; any recurrence of the original symptoms.

As other signs potentially related to a more serious underlying problem:

- Tar-like feces, or coffee-grounds appearance to vomit. Blood in the stomach will quickly turn black and clot due to the stomach's natural acids. Therefore, when blood is vomited, it looks like coffee grounds within the vomit. Blood coming from the intestine will be digested and form a black, metallic-smelling, tarry stool, referred to as melena. Either of these situations suggests gastrointestinal bleeding and warrants submission of a sample to your veterinarian, and a prompt recheck visit.
- Additional signs to watch for should be provided by your veterinarian based on specifics of your dog or cat's disorder and on medications that are prescribed.
- If your pet fails to drink any water for 12 hours or does not eat for more than 24 hours, an immediate follow-up is warranted.

### **ROUTINE FOLLOW-UP**

- Your veterinarian will discuss follow-up depending on the medications being prescribed and the severity of symptoms.
- Your pet should be reevaluated if there is recurrence of symptoms, and/or you are worried about a worsening appearance such as the onset of lethargy, sluggishness, or labored breathing.

*Other information that may be useful: "How-To" Client Education Sheet:*

- How to Manage Acute Gastrointestinal Upset at Home

Practice Stamp or Name & Address

Also available in Spanish.