

How to Manage Acute Gastrointestinal Upset at Home

BACKGROUND

The most common reasons for pets to have digestive upset (vomiting or diarrhea) include adverse food reactions, adverse medication effects, gastrointestinal inflammation (viral or bacterial infection in the intestine, for example), obstruction, or parasites. Adverse food reactions may include eating too fast, sudden diet change, or an allergy to a particular ingredient. Just as with people, pets can react to antibiotics or pain medication. More common in dogs than cats is obstruction: a pet swallows an object that cannot pass through the intestinal tract.

Just as with a person, some causes for digestive upset will just resolve with a little time, while others signal serious disease. If your pet has mild vomiting or diarrhea but appears to be otherwise normal, you can try supportive care at home. On the other hand, if your pet has profuse or frequent vomiting or diarrhea, or if it acts in any way disoriented or seems to be in distress, immediate evaluation is required. It must be determined what caused the vomiting, diarrhea, and/or decreased appetite, because treating the inciting cause will allow for a more successful outcome.

GETTING STARTED

Equipment/materials needed:

- Pedialyte or similar oral rehydration solution
- Syringe
- Cooked fresh chicken
- Cooked white rice

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

- If your pet is eating too fast, try offering smaller portions more frequently. If your pet eats fast because of competition with another pet, try feeding the pets in separate areas.
- If your pet is vomiting or has diarrhea, withholding food for several hours can allow the intestinal tract to rest, but food is not withheld for more than 12 hours (nor for more than 6 hours in puppies/kittens). If your pet continues to vomit for more than a day, or has diarrhea for more than 2 to 3 days, call your veterinarian.
- When you are cleaning up after your pet has vomited and/or had diarrhea, wash your hands appropriately. Parasites can also cause vomiting and diarrhea that you could contract.

PROCEDURE

Vomiting

Take away all food and water from your pet for 12 hours. Once your pet has not vomited for 12 hours, start the following protocol:

- Offer a small amount of Pedialyte-type oral rehydration solution. Offer small dogs 5 mL (1 teaspoon) of liquid and large dogs 15 mL (1 tablespoon) of liquid. If your pet does not want to drink the liquid, you draw up the same amount in an oral dosing syringe (available at a pharmacy or from your veterinarian) and empty the contents of the syringe in the cheek pouch. That is, with the pet's mouth remaining closed, you insert the syringe tip in the corner of the lips, ensure that the chin is a bit elevated (nose pointing upward), and squirt the liquid gently into the cheek pouch such that it enters the back of the mouth and is swallowed.

- If your pet is able to keep that amount of liquid down for 15 to 30 minutes, offer the same amount again. If your pet vomits, discontinue fluids and call your veterinarian.
- If your pet does not vomit, increase the amount of liquid you are giving by 50% every hour.
- If your pet does not vomit for 12 hours after a liquid has been introduced, offer a small amount of a bland diet.
- To prepare a bland diet, you will need cooked chicken and boiled white rice. Cook 3 parts white rice to 1 part chicken; prepare the chicken in the same way you prepare the rice—in boiling water. Do not add spices, salt, or pepper. Allow your pet's meal to cool down.
- Offer 1 teaspoon of the mixture for small pets; 1 tablespoon for large pets.
- If your pet does not vomit the initial serving of food, double the amount, and feed your pet this amount every 1 or 2 hours. If your pet continues to eat well, increase the amount you feed, and decrease the number of times you are feeding in a day. Your pet may return to a normal diet in 4 days if all symptoms have subsided. If your pet has any remaining signs of vomiting or diarrhea, call your veterinarian.

Diarrhea

If your pet has diarrhea, the main goal is to give a bland diet that is rich in starches instead of the usual diet. Maintaining intake of liquids is important, as your pet can become dehydrated from diarrhea. Make sure your pet is drinking plenty of water and/or oral rehydration solutions such as Pedialyte. It is important to offer a bland diet that is easily absorbed in the intestinal tract.

- To prepare a bland diet, you will need chicken and white rice. Cook 3 parts white rice to 1 part chicken; prepare the chicken in the same way you prepare the rice—in boiling water. Do not add spices, salt, or pepper. Allow your pet's meal to cool down.
- Offer $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the mixture for small pets; 1 cup for large pets. Feed your pet the same amount several times throughout the day.
- Your pet may return to a normal diet in 4 days if all symptoms have subsided. If your pet has any remaining signs of diarrhea, call your veterinarian.

Decreased Appetite

Your pet's appetite may decrease for a variety of reasons. It is advised to have a veterinarian rule out any diseases that may be causing the decreased appetite. These are very wide-ranging and must not be over- or underinterpreted. You should know that cats should not be allowed to go for more than 2 days without a meal. Prolonged loss of appetite in cats can lead to hepatic lipidosis, a serious disorder of the liver.

Offer your pet the bland chicken and rice diet described above. You may try adding chicken-flavored food stock for taste to entice your pet to eat. Some smaller pets learn to eat people food and will refuse to eat dog food. Do not allow your pet to do this, as human food does not provide a balanced diet for pets and can result in nutrient deficits. Dogs and cats need a properly balanced diet to prevent nutrition-related abnormalities. Therefore, if your pet prefers the bland diet, you can wean back onto the usual diet from before by mixing the two in gradually changing proportions:

10% original diet and 90% bland diet at first, then 20%/80%, and so forth, gradually transitioning over several days or even weeks to 100% regular diet.

AFTERWARDS

Once your pet can be switched back to a normal diet, slowly introduce pet food. Allow the switch to occur over several days to minimize the risk of recurrent diarrhea.

As stated above, if your pet continues to have vomiting or diarrhea, call your veterinarian. These symptoms can suggest a more serious disease that requires a more thorough examination and other treatments.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Can't I give over-the-counter medications for diarrhea or stomach upset to my pet?

No, you should not. Some of these drugs are dangerous for pets, but more importantly, giving these drugs can mask an underlying issue. For example, if your puppy is having diarrhea due to parvovirus, it is dangerous to delay the diagnosis by covering up the symptoms with over-the-counter (or human prescription) diarrhea medication.

Are there any parasites that I could contract from my pet's vomit and diarrhea?

You could contract a number of parasites, including roundworms, hookworms, coccidia, or *Giardia*. For this reason, you should use gloves, properly disinfect surfaces in contact with diarrhea, and practice thorough basic hygiene when a pet in the household has diarrhea.

How do I store the leftover chicken and rice?

You can place the leftover mixture in a sealed container and place it in the refrigerator.

My pet ate the first serving of food without vomiting. When I gave the second serving, he vomited. What should I do?

Do not feed your pet, and call your veterinarian.

In the vomit, I see the medications I gave earlier today. Should I give more now to make up for this?

As a general rule, no. Virtually all medications that are being given regularly can be skipped for one dose. Likewise, administering medications to a pet with an empty stomach, particularly when there is already nausea, can simply make nausea worse. It is best to continue with the medication schedule as if the medication had not been vomited.

Practice Stamp or Name & Address

Also available in Spanish.