

TOPIC #8: CHANGING YOUR DOG'S DIET AND HOW TO DEAL WITH ACUTE DIARRHEA

Most of us have had this situation before: Rover has just ran out of his normal kibble, so you run to the closest store only to find that they don't have his food on the shelf. You scan some labels and find one that has somewhat the same ingredients and take it home. Rover eats it and by that weekend, he has the kind of diarrhea that could peel wallpaper off of the walls. Or maybe, you notice that Skippy has had loose stool for the last few days, and you wonder if a trip to the vet is needed right away. Sound familiar? Conditions such as these are generally referred to as acute diarrhea and believe it or not, they do not always mean you need to pay an examination fee to get it under control.

Why does it happen?

Dogs, just like people, will at some point have varying degrees of diarrhea, and most of the time, will not need any intervention. Diarrhea is a very broad term used to define any abnormal stool that is softer than normal, and includes watery stools, straining and/or trying to defecate and only passing gas, soft stools with abnormal color or odor, and "cow pie" stools (not a very pleasant thought!). It is basically a result of the intestine pulling water out of the surrounding body tissues into the intestinal tract and traveling into the bowel. Most often, it is caused by a sudden change in a dog's food or from ingesting something outside in the yard that he/she thought looked yummy. Intestinal worms, stress, infection, and antibiotic use can all be diarrhea triggers too. This bowel upset is a result of the intestinal bacteria population changing or (in the case of antibiotics) decreasing in numbers. The naturally occurring bacteria is made up of many different species, all of which help to break down food and toxins that the animal ingests. Since bacteria are sensitive to pH changes and the type of food being passed through the tract, so sometimes slight changes in diet can make the natural flora shift from one species to another. Foodstuff being ingested can be called "substrate"—certain species of bacteria live on certain substrates, and if that substrate were to be eliminated, another species would take over the job, using the new substrate. There is more than one species working at a time (since food can be broken down into many substrates) and usually all of these work together nicely, which is why the bowel is normally happy and healthy.

How to switch to a new food source

Since each dog is different and will not respond the same way to major changes in food (some dogs won't get upset bowels no matter what you feed them), it is always a good idea to follow the diet below to help avoid any bowel upsets, and possibly avoid a trip to the vet and antibiotics. I call this remedy the altered ¼ rule because it will look similar to the diet in the next paragraph (diet often prescribed when antibiotics are needed):

- For the first 3 days, feed ¼ cup of the new food mixed with the regular food
- Next 3 days, feed ½ cup of new food mixed with old food
- Next 3 days, feed ¾ cup of new food mixed with old food
- Finally, feed all new food

If at any point during a step your dog gets very soft diarrhea, go back one step and instead of doing it for 3 days, increase each step to 7 days. If 1 week isn't long enough, then try two weeks. Keep adjusting until your pet can accept each change.

What to do at home

If you wake up one morning and see that your canine is suffering from noticeable diarrhea, you can try a bland diet to see if things improve within a day. As long as your dog appears normal and seems happy, active, and still has an appetite, the following diet can be tried before heading to your vet.

NOTE! This advice should not be tried on cats because their digestive systems are a lot different than dogs. It is recommended that you seek a professional as soon as possible. Also, there is a very big risk in delaying treatment for smaller dogs. This is because they will dehydrate a lot faster than bigger dogs, most often within 24hrs, especially if they are not drinking as usual. Water and electrolytes will be passed out in the stool faster in smaller breeds, so it is also recommended that you seek your vet.

- Feed ½ the usual amount of the bland diet (ex: 2 cups in the morning should be 1 cup instead)
- Bland foods include:
 - 1/3 meat—cooked meat is lower in fat than raw. Choices include boiled hamburger (or pan fried if strained well) and chicken (boneless/skinless breasts work the best)
 - 2/3 rice or another bland grain. White Rice is most preferred (some will do better on cooked oatmeal)
 - Do not add any oils or fats or anything salty to the diet
 - Allow plenty of water

Add to each meal plain yogurt (no-fat or low fat) 1-3 tablespoons. Yogurt naturally has bacteria cultures that will sooth the bowel and surprisingly works really well when added regularly to meals if soft stools are present. Or, boiled sweet potato at a rate of 2-4 Tbsp can also help. Because the pH has changed in the bowel, adding a probiotic such as Lactobacillus sporgenes will promote a healthy microbial flora of the intestinal tract. It safely passes through the stomach acid and grows in the small

intestine, producing lactic acid, which is metabolized to create a healthy micro environment (the following website has ordering information: <http://www.wellvet.com/spogogenes.html>).

It is also a good idea to have Pepto Bismol (tab or liquid) or Imodium on hand at home. It is also an even better idea to be sure to ask your vet the correct dosing for your dog BEFORE there's a problem, that way you won't be waiting for a call at 1AM, or won't be on vacation and need to call in. The dosage is based on your pet's weight and not according to the label, because that is based on a human's body.

Signs that indicate trouble and warrant a trip to your vet

- Act very sick
- Act lethargic
- Show bloating or abdominal pain (standing with the back arched and not willing to lay down)
- Fever—rectal temp above 103 degrees F (this is a good time to know what your dog's normal body temp is; can vary from 99 degrees to 102 per animal, so take the temp sometime and record it!)
- Dehydration—2 ways to check: 1) capillary refill time is the time it takes for the gums to return to normal color when pressed by a finger. This should take between 1-2 seconds. Longer than that means dehydration, and 2) hydration test is picking up the skin and pulling up slightly and observing how fast it returns to normal position. Again, anything over 2 seconds means dehydration (this may not be an accurate test for Bloodhounds, Bassets, or Shar Peis!!)
- Persistent vomiting
- Passing large amounts of blood in the stool

When diarrhea can't be control with a bland diet and yogurt, most likely your pet will be prescribed an antibiotic (Amoxicillin or Cephelex) and a medicine that reduces bowel mobility like Lomotil (prevents bowel spasms).