

AKC: Can Dogs Drink Too Much Water? The Dangers of Water Intoxication

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safety

You know the modern-day mantra: Stay hydrated! And that goes for your dog too. Make sure there's plenty of clean, fresh water available, especially during hot weather. But is it possible for your dog to drink too much water?

As important as it is to avoid dehydration, there can be too much of a good thing. Many owners — and even some veterinarians — are unaware that an overabundance of water in a dog's system can lead to frightening symptoms and even death.

What Is Water Intoxication?

Water intoxication goes by a variety of names, including water poisoning, hyperhydration, and water toxemia. No matter what you call it, this problem can come on suddenly, and the outcome can be fatal.

Here's what happens when the body is overwhelmed with an excessive amount of water. First, sodium levels outside the cells are depleted, a condition called hyponatremia. In an effort to rebalance itself, the body responds to the low blood sodium by increasing fluid intake inside the cells. Some organs, such as the liver, can accommodate the increased volume of their swelling cells, but others — in particular, the brain, which is encased in bone — cannot.

In humans, water intoxication usually results from drinking too much water after rigorous exercise or competing in water-drinking competitions. (In 2007, a 28-year-old mother of three from Sacramento, California, died after chugging two gallons of water in a radio contest called "Hold Your Wee for a Wii.") In dogs, excessive water intake often occurs when swimming, diving, or water-retrieving. Even play-biting the stream of water from a garden hose or sprinkler can overload a dog's system and lead to water intoxication. Because their bodies have to work harder to clear out the excess water in their system, toy and small dogs are at greater risk than larger ones.

Symptoms of Water Intoxication in Dogs

Symptoms of water intoxication include:

lethargy

bloating

vomiting

loss of coordination (including stumbling, falling, or staggering)

restlessness

drooling

pale gums

dilated pupils

glazed eyes

As the pressure in the brain increases and its cells begin to die off, the dog may have difficulty breathing, develop seizures, or slip into a coma.

How to Treat Water Intoxication in Dogs

Because water intoxication involves a lack of sodium, carefully replenishing that important mineral is crucial. Treatment includes the administration of electrolytes. (Moderation is key here, as super-concentrated sodium can cause severe neurological problems.) Veterinarians may administer drugs such as Mannitol to decrease