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# Nutritional Management of Acute Diarrhea in Dogs

## What Is Acute Diarrhea?

Diarrhea refers to loose stool that is passed more frequently and/or in larger amounts than usual. Affected dogs typically ask to go outside more often than usual and may have accidents in the house. They may strain when having bowel movements, which can be mistaken for constipation, and blood may be present in the stool. Some dogs with diarrhea may also have other signs of illness such as vomiting and lethargy, although many dogs act otherwise normal.

Diarrhea can generally be categorized as either acute (ie, short-term) or chronic (ie, long-term). Acute diarrhea comes on suddenly and lasts <2 weeks, whereas chronic diarrhea is more persistent. This distinction is important because it can help your veterinarian better understand what might be causing the issue and how best to diagnose and treat it.

## What Causes Acute Diarrhea?

There are many potential causes of acute diarrhea, including:

- Intestinal parasites
- Viral infection
- Bacterial infection
- Dietary issues (eg, sudden food change, excessive treats)
- Side effects from medications
- Toxin ingestion
- Inflammatory gastrointestinal disease (eg, colitis)
- Systemic disease (eg, kidney disease, hormonal imbalances)
- Stress

In many cases, however, no identifiable cause of a dog's diarrhea can be found, even with extensive testing.

## How Do Veterinarians Approach Acute Diarrhea?

Your veterinarian will start by asking detailed questions about your dog's recent diet, behavior, and environment. For example, if your dog recently snuck food off the kitchen table or just

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started a new medication like an antibiotic, those factors could explain their diarrhea.

Next, your veterinarian will perform a thorough physical examination in which they will look for signs of underlying diseases that may be causing your dog's diarrhea. In addition, to determine the best approach to diagnosis and treatment, they will assess your dog's overall condition and hydration status. This hands-on evaluation can help guide what diagnostic tests may be needed and how urgently treatment should begin.

After obtaining a history and performing an examination, your veterinarian will recommend appropriate diagnostic tests. In most cases, a fecal parasite test is recommended to rule out intestinal worms. Your veterinarian may also recommend blood tests or other diagnostics, depending on your dog's specific risk factors and examination findings. Although most cases of acute diarrhea resolve quickly with at-home treatment, a dog that is lethargic or dehydrated may need additional supportive care such as hospitalization for IV fluids.

## What Treatment Options Are Available for Acute Diarrhea?

If a specific cause of your dog's diarrhea is identified, treatment will focus on addressing that underlying cause. However, in many cases, a clear cause cannot be immediately found. In those situations, veterinarians will work to manage your pet's symptoms while monitoring for improvement. Veterinarians are also moving toward fiber and nutritional support when managing acute diarrhea, as these can help restore gut health.

## What Role Does Nutrition Play in Diarrhea Management?

Your veterinarian may recommend a therapeutic food to help manage your dog's diarrhea. A food high in fiber is commonly used to support these patients. These foods can help improve

stool consistency while promoting a healthy balance of bacteria and other intestinal microbes. Your veterinarian can offer specific guidance on how much and how frequently to feed your pet.

Once your dog's diarrhea has resolved, you can gradually transition them back to their regular diet. This transition should be made over a period of at least 7 days to reduce the risk for diarrhea recurrence. Follow your veterinarian's instructions for resuming your dog's normal diet.

If your dog has episodes of acute diarrhea, talk to your veterinarian about whether a therapeutic food may be appropriate for long-term feeding.

## How Can I Support My Dog's Digestive Health?

There are several steps you can take to reduce your dog's risk for diarrhea:

- Feed a complete, balanced diet.
- If you change your dog's current food, make the transition gradually over a 1-week period.
- Limit treats to no more than 10% of your pet's daily caloric intake.
- Keep your dog current on vaccines and parasite prevention.
- Monitor your dog closely when they are outdoors.
- Prevent access to human food or table scraps, including foods that may be toxic to dogs.
- Reduce your dog's stress level when possible.

## Conclusion

Many cases of acute diarrhea have no identifiable cause, and even if you do everything right, diarrhea may still occur. The good news is, with the right support, most cases can be resolved. Following your veterinarian's recommendations—whether diagnostic, dietary, or treatment-related—will give your dog the best chance for a quick and complete recovery.

### Dietary Recommendations From Your Veterinarian

Recommended diet: \_\_\_\_\_

Feeding instructions: \_\_\_\_\_

Other notes: \_\_\_\_\_