

# Pancreatitis in Dogs – Symptoms, Causes & Treatment

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## Key Points

- Pancreatitis in dogs is potentially life-threatening — know the signs to look for.
- If you suspect your dog may have pancreatitis, a call to the veterinarian quickly is vital.
- There are a number of causes and risk factors that can bring on pancreatitis, though it often seems to hit out of the blue.

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- [emergency](#)

Pancreatitis in dogs is one of those conditions that owners must be informed about before it strikes because the warning signs may not always be obvious at first, the symptoms might be mistaken for something less serious, and yet it's potentially life-threatening. The medical definition of pancreatitis is simple: "inflammation of the pancreas." But like all serious conditions, there is more to it than that.

Because it is dangerous, a suspected case of pancreatitis needs to be addressed by a veterinarian as quickly as possible and not dealt with by "DIY" treatments. As with all medical issues, even the best online resource is not a replacement for the medical guidance from your vet.

Before looking at the details of pancreatitis, let's take away the "itis" and explain the small but vital organ itself:

The pancreas is responsible for releasing enzymes that aid in digestion. When the organ is working normally, the enzymes become active only when they reach the small intestine. In a dog with pancreatitis, however, the enzymes activate when they're released, inflaming and causing damage to the pancreas and its surrounding tissue and other organs. According to the [Whole Dog Journal](#), the enzymes can actually begin to digest the pancreas itself, which causes extreme pain to your dog.



#### Classic signs of pancreatitis in dogs

- Hunched back
- [Repeated vomiting](#) (either several times within a few hours or periodically over several days)
- Pain or distention of the abdomen (dog appears uncomfortable or bloated)
- [Diarrhea](#)
- Loss of appetite

- Dehydration
- Weakness/lethargy
- [Fever](#)

If your dog exhibits one of these signs, and only infrequently, monitor her. But if she exhibits multiple signs at once, and repeatedly, a call to the veterinarian quickly is vital.

#### Dehydration and pancreatitis in dogs

Dehydration is due to a greater fluid loss than fluid intake. Diarrhea or vomiting can cause dehydration, but those signs together will cause a greater fluid deficit and dehydration because the dog's fluid input (drinking) cannot keep up with the fluid losses. If the diarrhea becomes bloody, the condition worsens and the dehydration can become an emergency.

Other factors such as fever require increase fluid intake and can lead to dehydration along with other metabolic issues such as kidney disease, etc.

Blood in a dog's stool indicates a loss and significant inflammatory response requiring a veterinarian's attention but it can be caused by a multitude of factors, from ulceration to parasites. Dehydration is a serious condition that can lead to death. It is an emergency and requires immediate veterinary care.

Any lethargic dog who is not drinking water or cannot hold water down should be suspected of dehydration and examined by a veterinarian. Dry mucous membranes (such as gums) may be a quick way of assessing dehydration but as always, when in doubt, consult with your veterinarian.



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### Causes of pancreatitis in dogs

There are a number of causes and risk factors that can bring on pancreatitis.

Though often the attack appears seemingly out of the blue. Among them are:

- A high-fat diet  
This is a major cause of pancreatitis, especially for a dog who gets one large helping of fatty food in one sitting
- A history of dietary indiscretion (a medical term for saying your dog will eat anything)
- Obesity
- Hypothyroidism (or other endocrine diseases)

- Severe blunt trauma
- [Diabetes mellitus](#)
- Certain medications or other toxins  
These include cholinesterase inhibitors, calcium, potassium bromide, phenobarbital, l-asparaginase, estrogen, salicylates, azathioprine, thiazide diuretics, and vinca alkaloids.
- There may, in some cases, be a genetic predisposition. Certain breeds or types of dogs have been associated with higher risks of pancreatitis such as [Miniature Schnauzers](#) and some of the smaller toy and terrier breeds.

More about those fats: [Human food](#) is especially dangerous, though even high-fat dog food may cause pancreatitis. So owner vigilance is particularly required around [holidays](#) and other festive occasions—they can bring well-meaning guests who slip your buddy a fatty piece of lamb, or a tray of buttery cookies left within reach of an eager muzzle. In fact, the day after [Thanksgiving](#) is known for more than just Black Friday bargains. It's one of the busiest days of the year pancreatitis-related emergency vet visits.

Basically, if your dog is showing any signs of abdominal pain, the worst thing to do is feed him a fatty diet. This is one of many reasons that giving your dog [table scraps](#), as tempting as it may be, is not advisable.

How does a vet diagnose pancreatitis in dogs?

- Your dog's medical history
- Blood tests to measure pancreatic enzymes
- Physical examination including stomach, gums, heart, temperature
- Radiographs or ultrasound, to rule out other causes
- Fine needle aspiration of the pancreas

As the [Merck Veterinary Manual](#) notes, as with any disease, no test should be used in isolation for diagnosis, and all clinical findings should be used in conjunction to arrive at the most appropriate diagnosis.



What's the difference between acute and chronic pancreatitis?

**Acute Pancreatitis**

An acute attack of pancreatitis means it comes on suddenly, with no previous appearance of the condition before. It can become life threatening to other organs if the inflammation spreads.

## **Chronic Pancreatitis**

A chronic condition is one that has developed over time, slowly, and often without symptoms. This condition can result from repeated bouts of acute pancreatitis.

Both acute and chronic forms can be either severe or mild, and both result in pain.

Treatment and management of pancreatitis in dogs

There's no fancy treatment for acute pancreatitis. First and foremost, your dog's pain must be managed, and early intervention to prevent further complications is key. The most common treatment and management options are:

- Intravenous (IV) fluid therapy in severe pancreatitis
- Vigorous monitoring of a worsening condition
- Antiemetic medication for vomiting (to prevent dehydration)
- Resting the pancreas (withholding food and water for 24 hours)  
Long-term management includes:
- Vigilant monitoring of fat intake—No table scraps allowed!
- Use of a prescription diet of gastrointestinal-supportive low-fat, or ultra-low fat, food.
- Feed smaller, more frequent meals instead of one larger meal
- Have amylase and lipase levels checked by a veterinarian regularly

Can supplements be used to prevent or manage pancreatitis in dogs?

It is important to reiterate that pancreatitis is a serious condition, so home remedies shouldn't be used in place of veterinary intervention. That said, some vets believe [digestive enzyme supplements](#) with pancreatin can help some (not all) dogs by reducing the work of the pancreas and inhibiting pancreatic secretion. These come in over-the-counter strength as well as prescription strength.



[Fish oil](#) may seem counterintuitive at first, because of its high fat content, but it can actually help lower blood lipid levels. Studies suggest a high level of fish oil (about 1,000 mg. per 10 pounds of body weight for dog with high lipid levels; about half that amount for dogs with normal levels) is helpful to dogs with acute pancreatitis. When supplementing with fish oil, also supplement with 5 to 10 IU of vitamin E.

There have been human studies suggesting that vitamin E (with selenium), vitamin C, beta-carotene, and methionine may help prevent pancreatitis. Conversely, another human study reveals that [probiotics](#) can make acute pancreatitis worse.

Always speak with your veterinarian before offering any supplements to your pet.

