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Dealing with diarrhoea

By Ness Bird – Nutrition Adviser and RVN ©

Diarrhoea occurs when food travels too quickly through the intestine, and water and nutrients are not properly extracted from the stool. The following all come under the same broad category of diarrhoea:-

- Stools passed more frequently than normal. As a general guideline, dogs will usually pass faeces as many times per day as they are fed +/-.
- Stools that are normal first thing in the day but become progressively looser as the day goes on.
- Stools that are perhaps not loose, but softer than they should be/more voluminous than normal.
- Stools which are sporadically loose.
- Unusually coloured stools.
- Stools which are smellier than normal.

Why does the problem need addressing?

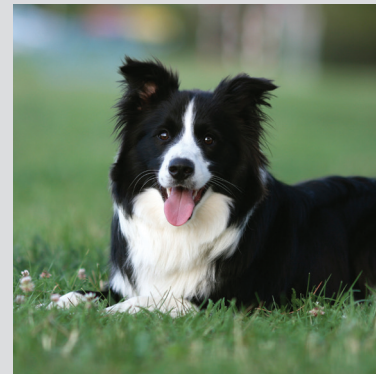
Loose stools are unpleasant, difficult to clean up and unhygienic. Although your dog may appear to be outwardly healthy, the longer-term consequences can be serious. Untreated diarrhoea can result in:-

- An imbalance of electrolytes and dehydration.
- An imbalance of gut bacteria.
- Loss of weight and condition because nutrients are not digested, absorbed and metabolised to their full potential.
- A dog that is more vulnerable to other illness.
- Impacted anal glands. If the stools are not well formed, then the natural emptying mechanism may fail.

When to call the vet

If your dog suffers from mild symptoms, remains outwardly well, is energetic and has a good appetite; careful dietary management may be the solution. Many bouts of diarrhoea will clear up after a few days. However, there are times when a veterinary examination is warranted. These include:-

- An acute and dramatic onset of diarrhoea.
- Prolonged diarrhoea where dietary management has failed to help.





- Cases where other symptoms are present, particularly vomiting.
- Your dog appears unwell and is lethargic, inappetent, or shows abdominal discomfort. A “praying” position is typical of acute pancreatic problems which warrant immediate treatment.
- Yellow/grey or paler than usual stools which may be indicative of pancreatic problems, liver disease or giardia.
- Greenish colour stools which may indicate the presence of bile.
- Bright red blood in the stool - a typical symptom of a dog with colitis. Mucous may also be visible. Copious amounts of red blood could indicate an obstruction in the lower part of the digestive tract and therefore all bleeding should be investigated.
- Black, “tarry” looking stools – caused by dark blood (malaena); this indicates bleeding from higher up within the digestive tract – a serious problem which requires immediate veterinary intervention.
- You suspect your dog may have eaten or drunk something he/she shouldn’t have e.g. stools, garbage, pond water.
- Bacterial / viral infections are known to be doing the rounds.

Diagnosing the problem

The vet will initially palpate your dog’s abdomen and take his/her temperature. If the problem has been ongoing, it’s wise to be prepared with a faecal sample.

Blood tests may help diagnose exocrine pancreatic insufficiency, small intestinal disease and bacterial overgrowth. Other diagnostic techniques could include endoscopy, sonography and gut biopsies. Blood and faecal samples are relatively easy to obtain, so your vet will often carry out non-invasive procedures first, and if necessary, undertake more complex procedures later to establish a definitive diagnosis.

What is colitis?

Colitis is a term meaning “inflammation of the colon”. It is vital to establish the reason for the inflamed colon and subsequent symptoms. Many dogs suffer bouts of colitis, and owners often resign themselves to accepting that their dogs have “sensitive stomachs”. This does not have to be the case if the root cause can be established and addressed.

Potential causes of diarrhoea

Over-feeding – whilst excess nutrients can be converted to body fat, the digestive system in some dogs can’t cope with this extra work, and the food simply passes through the body. Weigh your dog and weigh the food using your kitchen scales to ensure the correct daily volume is being fed. A small reduction of the daily allowance may resolve the problem. Don’t forget to factor in any other foods given in addition to the main diet as these supply calories too.

Sudden change of diet – changing over to a new diet too quickly, without giving the dog’s digestion sufficient opportunity to adapt to the new ingredients or nutrient balance can cause diarrhoea. Revert to a tried and tested product known to agree with your dog. Once things have settled down, try reintroducing the new food gradually over the course of seven to ten days. Any new food, treat or ingredient can be equally provocative so also take a look at other new foods in addition to the main diet.

Stress/overexcitement/anxiety – these can all cause or contribute to diarrhoea. When a dog’s fight or flight mechanism



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kicks in, extra stomach acid and digestive juices are produced and stomach muscle tension increases in order to quickly digest and eliminate food in the digestive system. This helps to prepare the body for immediate action, but can result in loose stools.

Change of water source – this is a more common problem in puppies, but can affect adult dogs too. It's worth considering if you have moved house. Use a pure source of water (filtered or bottled), and gradually start introducing tap water once the symptoms have completely abated. Ingestion of sea water and contaminated pond/puddle water can cause more serious problems and it is recommended that you seek veterinary advice.

Infectious causes may include:

- Bacterial infection such as campylobacter and salmonella
- Viral infection such as parvovirus
- Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth

Parasitic causes may include:

- Worm infestation such as roundworm and tapeworm
- Protozoal parasites such as giardia and isospora

Clinical causes may include:

- Inflammatory bowel disease
- Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency
- Intoxication
- Pancreatitis
- Intestinal foreign body
- Neoplasia
- Intussusception
- Protein losing enteropathy





Dietary allergies/food intolerance

Food allergies and dietary intolerance can cause diarrhoea. However it is important not to assume that a diet change is going to reap an immediate positive result – particularly if the problem has been long-standing. There is likely to be damage to the digestive system, so simply changing the brand or type of food may not be enough. Once diarrhoea sets hold, the digestive enzymes suffer, residue accumulates in the large bowel and the friendly gut flora are often depleted. It can take time to get things back to normal.

The most common dietary allergen is wheat. Beef, soya and dairy products are also very provocative ingredients which are present in many commercial pet foods and treats. Sometimes they are under loose descriptions such as “derivatives of meat/cereal origin”, so it’s important to buy brands such as Arden Grange which include only named ingredients.

Vets often favour hydrolysed prescription diets. Hydrolysis breaks the protein down into tiny fractions that are too small to annoy the immune system (a food allergy is an adverse immune response to a dietary protein). These diets are useful in cases where food allergies are suspected, but the exact culprits cannot be pinpointed. The problem is that dogs can also develop intolerances (where the immune system is not directly involved) to any ingredient, including proteins, hydrolysed or otherwise. Another disadvantage is the cost.

If food allergies/intolerance are suspected:-

- 1) Consult your vet if symptoms are acute to rule out other causes and obtain treatment if necessary.
 - 2) Carefully assess the main diet, and also all human food, treats, titbits, training rewards and recreational chews.
Just because your dog may have eaten these foods in the past with no adverse effect, it doesn’t mean they’re not provocative now. If your dog is eating any of the ingredients most commonly associated with problems (wheat, beef, soya and dairy products), these should be eliminated first.
 - 3) If your dog is already eating a high quality hypoallergenic diet, look for a diet with novel ingredients. Whilst ingredients typically used in the Arden Grange maintenance recipes such as chicken, lamb and gluten-free grains (rice and maize) are excellent quality and very highly digestible to the majority of dogs, some sensitive dogs can still become allergic or intolerant to them. This is where Arden Grange sensitive ocean white fish and potato may come in useful. It moves away from the more common meats and grains, and for many dogs, provides both a novel protein source (white fish) and carbohydrate source (potato).
- Food allergies may manifest in skin problems – look out in particular for itchy feet and ear infections. Some dogs with allergies have only skin problems, others suffer only digestive problems and some suffer from both. Intolerances usually manifest in digestive problems.
 - It can take time for the body to eliminate residue from ingredients it hasn’t liked and it’s important to give a food trial approximately six to eight weeks plus, unless symptoms become worse on the new food.
 - The gastrointestinal tract may have suffered damage, so it’s important to make it as easy as you can for the digestion and immune system to promote a speedier recovery of the gut.
 - The Arden Grange recipes that include chicken oil are generally safe for dogs with chicken allergies because the oil has been filtered to remove protein particles. Dietary intolerances to this fat source remain extremely rare. The chicken digest is hydrolysed, and also not commonly associated with adverse reactions.



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Managing the problem

Small frequent meals

The initial recommendation to help firm up loose stools is traditionally to starve the dog for 24 hours, ensuring plenty of fresh water is always available. Although this gives the digestive tract resting time, dogs benefit from continued nutrition (providing this is appropriate and there is no concurrent vomiting or acute pancreatitis) in order to supply the protein needed for healing and calories to meet their energy requirement. Small, frequent feeds give the gut less work to do at any one time and are beneficial during recovery.

An easily digested, low fat diet

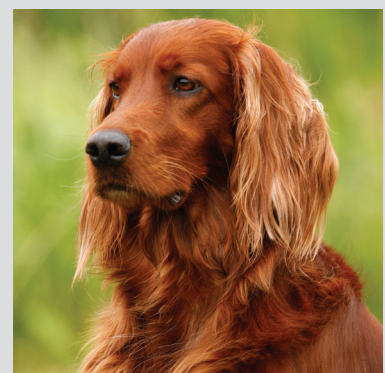
A bland diet is recommended; and home-prepared meals of white fish (which is very digestible) and boiled, mashed potato (softened with water not milk/ butter) is usually well-tolerated. Arden Grange partners sensitive fresh white fish and potato is a convenient ready-made option. Feeding normal food before the gut has had a chance to recover can result in accumulation of fat residue within the large bowel. This residue causes an osmotic reaction in the bowel, and the result is more diarrhoea.

Other recovery diet options are: low fat/low residue veterinary diets, home-prepared chicken/egg and rice/sweet potato. If allergy/intolerance is suspected, the fish and potato has an advantage in that it moves away from the more common ingredients in pet food in case they were responsible for the symptoms. Arden Grange adult sensitive ocean white fish and potato is the ideal follow-on food. It's important not to introduce a regular diet too quickly. The reintroduction of commercial food is more likely to be a success if the gut has been allowed sufficient recovery time on bland food first.

Reintroducing commercial food

If the home prepared food is suiting, a small amount of adult sensitive ocean white fish and potato can be introduced after about five days. You may find you need to feed the home prepared food a little longer, or perhaps a little less depending on the individual. Although the home prepared food is deficient in minerals for long term use, it is safe to feed for up to two weeks. If a small volume gives no adverse effects, the amount of adult sensitive ocean white fish and potato can gradually be increased and the home prepared food phased out.

We recommend that dry food is fed soaked in a little warm water for about thirty minutes prior to serving. Soft kibble is easier for the digestive enzymes to cope with, especially if they are already under pressure.





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Caution with other foods

Poorly digested protein, particularly that derived from rawhide, may further contribute to a buildup of residue in the bowel. It is essential to review other food and treats being fed because even if they are not directly responsible for the diarrhoea, they may be making the problem worse.

Arden Grange sensitive benefits

Arden Grange adult sensitive ocean white fish and potato contains ingredients which are highly digestible. It also includes krill, which is a great source of omega-3 DHA and EPA fatty acids, which have anti-inflammatory properties. With long-term use these fatty acids may even improve allergy thresholds. Prebiotics and nucleotides are included to help support efficient immune and digestive function.

Probiotics

Diarrhoea can cause disturbance to the friendly bowel flora, so extra help may be needed by means of probiotics.

Although we include prebiotics, which are a good food source for the healthy gut flora, extrusion renders probiotics (which are live organisms – and a “dose” of the friendly flora themselves) rather less live! Live yogurt is popular but a huge amount is needed to replenish the depressed bowel flora in a dog’s gut. With many dogs being lactose intolerant, and with casein (milk protein) being a common allergen, it is safest to use a commercial supplement formulated for canines such as Lintbell’s YuDIGEST.

Fibre

Increasing the fibre content of the diet can help, but it might cover the problem rather than address the cause. Adding a fibre source will help increase the transit time within the gut, but it doesn’t address why the food is passing through too quickly in the first place. Symptoms may reduce whilst the fibre is given, but are likely to recur once it is stopped.

Too much fibre can cause constipation, so if additional fibre is necessary, then use a supplement formulated for dogs, which is easy to dose and contains good levels of both soluble and insoluble fibres such as Protexin Profibre. (This product also includes probiotics).

Other supplements

Vets often prescribe electrolyte solutions to help replenish those lost as a result of diarrhoea. This may help prevent your dog from becoming dehydrated. Below is a recipe to make your own solution should you require it urgently before seeking your vets’ advice.

Recipe for home prepared electrolyte solution

- 1) Take 4 pints of boiled water (cooled)
- 2) Add 1 teaspoon salt
- 3) Add 4 teaspoons of sugar
- 4) Stir until dissolved
- 5) Serve at body temperature or cooler if preferred

Do not add more than the recommended quantities of sugar and salt.



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Never withhold water and always ensure fresh drinking water is always available.

Other nutritional supplements that may aid recovery are those that form a protective lining of the gut mucosa such as slippery elm.

Long term digestive health

The digestibility of your dog's food is crucial in maximising long-term health, particularly after bouts of diarrhoea. The Arden Grange range is extremely well digested, and contains only nutritionally valuable ingredients that are easily metabolised and used within the body. The recipes provide a concentrated source of nutrition, so avoiding the overly large feeding volumes that often result in more waste.

Important notice

As a responsible and ethical company, Arden Grange fully appreciate that caution must be taken when discussing the potential benefits of our diets. Whilst our recipes may be beneficial to some dogs, we must highlight that they are not a substitute for veterinary intervention in the case of a sick animal.