



Honey's Canine Health Guide N°11

BLOAT

By the Honey's Health Team

The Honey's Health Team, which includes vets, vet nurses and other experts, has provided free canine nutritional and health advice to thousands of patients since it was formed in 2009.

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Overview

Since the 1980s, the incidence of bloat (also known as gastric torsion, gastric dilatation-volvulus, or GDV) has increased dramatically. In this condition the stomach twists or flips over on itself and air is trapped. Then any food in the stomach begins to ferment, creating further gases. Later on, circulation to the stomach and spleen are cut off to the point where the dog may go into shock and die.

It seems to affect mature, deep-chested dogs the most, especially larger breeds. The condition is extremely serious and potentially fatal.

If you suspect bloat, contact your vet immediately.

Diet has a huge role to play in the prevention of bloat. Kibble, in particular, has been shown to be one of the primary causes.

For a dog that has suffered and survived bloat, a dry food, kibble or processed food diet is definitely not to be recommended. Instead, consider switching the dog to a raw food diet, which has been shown to improve the chances of preventing a recurrence.

After bloat, many dogs lose weight and it is important to get this back on as soon as possible, since a healthy weight is one of the factors that reduce risk.

Symptoms

Bloat can come on very quickly. Dogs will typically display restlessness, their bellies may become swollen or distended and they could attempt to vomit with or without success. Possible symptoms include:

- Anxious behavior
- Depression
- Vomiting (severe and then dry heaving)
- Rapid heartbeat
- Abdominal pain and distention
- Pale mucus membrane (inside the nose and mouth)
- Collapse
- Excessive drooling
- Laboured breathing
- Weak pulse

Other causes for the above symptoms can include gastroenteritis and food bloat (as a result of eating too much food).

Diagnosis

An experienced vet may be able to diagnose bloat by means of observation and examination. Generally, however, it is diagnosed by the following means:

- X-ray of the abdomen
 - Urine analysis
 - Plasma test for lactate substance
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What exactly is bloat?

Bloat is caused by gas building up in the stomach and being unable to escape. The gas itself is caused by trapped air that has begun to go rotten or ferment.

The word bloat is actually used to describe two different conditions:

1. Where there has simply been an accumulation of gases. This is called bloat or dilation.
2. When the gas builds up to such an extent that it causes the stomach to rotate or twist on its axis, this is called torsion or volvulus.

The terms bloat, torsion, gastric torsion, gastric dilatation-volvulus and GDV are generally considered interchangeable. However, it is important to remember that whereas bloat/dilation can exist in a low-level way for hours and even days, once torsion occurs the situation can become critical in a matter of minutes. As the gas builds up in the dog's stomach it expands, which in turn puts pressure on several large arteries and veins. When the pressure builds to a certain point, it reduces and may completely cut off blood flow. Tissues begin to die and toxins accumulate. The prognosis for victims is improving all the time. In the past vets estimated that half of victims died, now it is believed to be between one in five and one in three cases.

Why does bloat occur?

Although vets are now able to save a much higher percentage of dogs that have suffered bloat, no one can say with certainty what causes it in the first place. Clearly gases build up. But why? Perdue University in the United States, which leads the field in terms of research into bloat, has been studying the problem since around 2005 and have not managed to reach a definitive conclusion. However, they have found which dogs are at greatest risk:

- Dogs who experience anxiety are much, much more likely to suffer from bloat. In percentage terms, Perdue says fearful dogs have a much greater chance of falling victim. Calm, cheerful dogs bloat much, much less.
- The highest risk factor is believed to be anatomical. Larger, deep-chested dogs seem to suffer more from bloat, possibly because of the relationship between the esophagus and stomach. The theory is best explained by imagining that the digestive system is a piece of plasticine. As it is stretched it becomes weaker and begins to sag. It is thought that what vets call the gastroesophageal angle increases and this may lead to bloat. It is wrong to believe that this only happens with larger dogs, however. Smaller dogs can also be affected.
- Dogs that are fed just one meal a day and eat really, really quickly are at higher risk.
- Diet has a huge role to play in prevention. Dogs that are fed dried food (kibble) have the greatest chance of suffering from bloat. A high fat content in processed dog food seems to push up the chances of an attack, too.
- Older dogs are more likely to suffer. Perdue claim, in fact, that the risk rises by 20 per cent per year. This could be because the ligaments holding the stomach in place become weaker as the dog ages.
- It seems to run in families. Close relatives (parents, offspring and siblings) of bloat victims have a 63% higher chance of suffering themselves.

Note, Perdue University found no evidence that limiting exercise and water consumption before or after eating made any difference to the risk.

Treatment

Once bloat has been diagnosed, emergency treatment is required. This usually involves:

- Stabilising the heart
- Inserting a tube into the stomach to release the gas
- Surgery to return the internal organs into their normal positions
- Any organ repair that may be required

If torsion has occurred, the patient's stomach may be surgically secured to (prophylactic gastropexy) prevent a repeat of the problem.

Reducing the chances of bloat

There are a number of ways of reducing the chance of bloat, including:

- If your dog is anxious, work out ways of reducing stress levels.
 - Feed your dog smaller meals throughout the day rather than one large meal.
 - If your dog gulps his or her food, obtain a special bowl designed to slow down eating.
 - Do not feed dried food (kibble) or other foods that are high in unhealthy fats.
 - Ask your vet about prophylactic gastropexy as this dramatically reduces the chances of bloat.
 - Switch your dog to an appropriate raw diet (see below).
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Holistic treatment

Holistic vets offer a variety of preventative treatment options including:

- Chinese herbs
 - Homeopathy
 - Digestive enzymes
 - Probiotics
 - Calming herbs, flower essences, Tellington TT Touch Method, aromatherapy and other calming techniques
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A word about preventing gas

All dogs, regardless of their diet, are likely to have a certain amount of flatulence. The most frequent cause is the carbohydrates in processed food – easily remedied by a switch to natural feeding. Antibiotics may also be responsible, in which case a course of probiotics will often help. A small percentage of dogs produce wind as a result of eating vegetables, or particular vegetables, and this can be dealt with by reducing the percentage of vegetables being served or excluding them completely. Incorporating more chicken wings in the diet can help, and so can adding a human-grade organic bone meal supplement.

Prebiotics and probiotics

Dogs, like human beings, have bacteria living in their gut. The bacteria themselves are made up of 'unfriendly' strains that can make the dog ill and 'friendly' strains that keep it well. Normally, the balance is in favour of the 'friendly' bacteria, but sometimes – such as after a course of antibiotics, during stress or through poor diet – the 'unfriendly' bacteria get the upper hand. This is called intestinal dysbiosis, a bacterial imbalance that results in an overgrowth of bad bacteria and yeast. Dysbiosis has been linked to various disorders, including yeast infections, irritable bowel syndrome and rheumatoid arthritis. It is treated by restoring the balance with prebiotics, probiotics and a healthy (natural) diet.

Probiotics are beneficial bacteria that can be found in various foods. When you eat probiotics, you will add these healthy bacteria to your intestinal tract. Common strains include the Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium families of bacteria. Prebiotics, on the other hand, are non-digestible foods that make their way through our digestive system and help good bacteria grow and flourish. Prebiotics keep beneficial bacteria healthy. Happily, you don't need to buy special canine prebiotics or probiotics, as those designed for humans work perfectly. If you need a prebiotic, try aloe vera or chicory. If you need a probiotic, try one containing Lactobacillus, Acidophilus and/ or Bifidus-type bacteria with FOS (fructooligosaccharides). Use the minimum recommended human dose.

The role of diet

There is a great deal of anecdotal evidence that a species appropriate or raw diet greatly reduces the chances of bloat occurring and more about this type of feeding will be found below. Our broad recommendations are:

- Avoid fatty meats
- Use lean meats
- Increase the frequency of meals (several small meals a day instead of one large meal)
- Use a bowl stand to ensure that the dog does not have to lean too far
- Use a special bowl to slow down eating if your dog is a quick eater
- Avoid too many vegetables as the fermentation process can produce gas
- Include green tripe in the diet.

A natural, biologically appropriate diet will also aid and support optimum health and is to be recommended in all but very complicated cases (such as where the dog may have had recent bowel surgery).

If you live in the UK, Honey's Health Team will be delighted to devise a special dietary plan for your dog. Feeding a natural diet couldn't be easier and we can do all the hard work for you – working out exactly what your dog should eat each day (and how much, of course), explaining what to buy and how to prepare it. If you would prefer, and you will be under no obligation, we will be happy to supply the food you need and deliver it straight to your door.

Free expert advice

At Honey's we will be delighted to provide you with unlimited, free advice – we don't mind if you never, ever plan to become a customer. Moreover, you can also consult our Health Team (which includes vets, veterinary nurses and other experts) free of charge. We will be pleased to show you how to make your own food, too. We maintain a list of holistic vets, who we are happy to recommend.



Free book

If you want to know about canine health and nutrition, then please visit our website and download our free book *Honey's Natural Feeding Handbook for Dogs*, or contact us direct and, if you are based in the UK, we will pop a free copy in the post.

General information about raw feeding

There is growing evidence that dogs live longer, healthier and happier lives if they eat the same sort of diet they would enjoy in the wild. That is to say: raw, fresh meat, bones and vegetables. Such a diet is referred to as species appropriate *aka* natural feeding *aka* raw feeding *aka* (what a lot of things it is *also known as*) the BARF diet.

Dogs and their wolf cousins have been eating raw food for over a million years and they thrive on it. If your dog has any health issues, a raw food diet could make a huge difference. Benefits include a glossy coat, healthy skin, lean muscle tone, robust immune system, sweet-smelling breath, healthy teeth and gums, increased energy, better digestion and a strong heart.

Indeed, if your dog has any health issues now (even minor problems such as allergies, dry skin, bad breath and what the Americans refer to, euphemistically, as 'gas') it is quite likely that a switch to a raw food diet will clear them up.



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The advice and information contained in this fact sheet is for guidance only. The Honey's Health Team (vets, veterinary nurses and other experts) is here to help you in any way we can. However, nothing can replace a physical examination by a vet or other qualified professional.