



# Honey's Canine Health Guide N°6

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## PANCREATITIS

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## A quick overview

The pancreas is situated in the front part of the abdomen close to the stomach. It is a complex organ with multiple functions. The endocrine function of the pancreas (the part that releases hormones into the bloodstream) controls the blood sugar by producing the hormones insulin and glucagon which are released into the blood. The exocrine function of the pancreas produces digestive enzymes that are released into the first part of the small intestine through a small duct.

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## What is pancreatitis?

Pancreatitis means inflammation (not infection) of the pancreas. When the pancreas becomes inflamed the digestive enzymes are activated before they are passed into the small intestine, the pancreas is, so to speak, 'digesting itself'. Pancreatitis is a fairly common condition in dogs, where it can take many forms ranging from mild irritation and discomfort to life-threatening and extremely painful acute disease. Pancreatitis always requires veterinary treatment.

After a severe bout of acute pancreatitis, the pancreas may have been damaged to the extent that it no longer produces adequate digestive enzymes. This is a condition referred to as exocrine pancreas insufficiency (EPI). This condition is more often seen in German Shepherds where it is a common cause of malabsorption in young animals with no prior history of pancreatitis.

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## Causes of pancreatitis

Many small animal vets will tell you that pancreatitis is seen much more frequently around Christmas and Easter, when we all tend to eat fatter foods and may (intentionally or not) share these with our dogs. Another common reason is where a dog who has recently been moved onto a high-fat diet, maybe because he or she has been diagnosed with kidney disease or for other reasons, has been losing weight.

Whatever the circumstances, ingesting an unusually fatty meal or a change to a diet rich in fat is the one single main risk factor for developing acute pancreatitis.

Other, but less common, risk factors include severe trauma, abdominal surgery, medications or infections.

Chronic or recurring pancreatitis generally develops after a severe initial bout of acute pancreatitis.

In rare cases, where significant parts of the pancreas are destroyed during a particularly severe acute attack, the dog may go on to develop diabetes or exocrine pancreas insufficiency (EPI) due to lack of pancreatic function.

Thankfully, most dogs suffering their first acute episode will recover completely.

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## Symptoms

Pancreatitis ranges from mild forms to severe and even fatal disease. A dog with acute pancreatitis may vomit and (less commonly) have diarrhoea. The main symptom tends to be abdominal pain. The dog will typically be subdued and refuse to eat. The textbook description of a dog in pain from pancreatitis is the so-called 'prayer position', where the dog tries to keep his or her hind legs straight while lowering the front part of the body and stretching out the front legs. Not all dogs with pancreatitis will assume this position though it is very characteristic for this condition. This is not to be confused with the healthy dog having a morning-yoga stretch who may briefly strike the same pose.

Acute pancreatitis requires an immediate veterinary visit. Your veterinarian will palpate the abdomen and often be able to confirm the site of the pain. An ultrasound scan may be suggested. In most cases, a firm diagnosis can be reached through a blood test to measure the level of pancreas specific lipase in the blood. This is a digestive enzyme that leaks into the circulation when the pancreas is damaged and inflamed.

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## Treatment

The treatment is purely supportive. Severe cases may need to be hospitalised to receive intravenous fluid therapy. Pain killing medication is practically always indicated. Once hydration, shock, vomiting and pain have been addressed, a strictly controlled diet is the mainstay of managing pancreatitis. In the first instance this focuses on letting the pancreas rest by starving the dog for 24 hours and then adhering strictly to a low-fat, highly digestible diet during the period of recovery. Once the inflammation has settled most dogs will be able to gradually return to a normal diet.

Most dogs recover completely after a bout of pancreatitis. However, in some cases, the acute episode will have damaged the pancreas leading to recurring episodes (chronic pancreatitis) and, as mentioned above, more serious consequences are seen in very rare cases.

Homeopathic treatment often has a profound effect on a dog with pancreatitis. If your dog suffers from recurring pancreatitis, I highly recommend that you seek the help of an experienced veterinary homeopath. Acupuncture can also help reduce the tendency to chronic inflammation.

If you are looking for professional support:

For osteopaths: [www.associationofanimalosteopaths.com](http://www.associationofanimalosteopaths.com)

For veterinary homeopaths: [www.bahvs.com](http://www.bahvs.com)

For veterinary acupuncturists: [www.ivas.com](http://www.ivas.com)

For veterinary physiotherapist: [www.acpat.org/](http://www.acpat.org/)

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## The role of diet

Diet has a very important role to play in the treatment of pancreatitis. A low-fat, highly digestible, natural, raw food diet will not only help reduce the effects of the disease, but will also aid and support optimum health. It is to be recommended in all but very complicated cases (such as where the dog may have had recent bowel surgery).

At Honey's, we normally suggest that following a flare of pancreatitis, and in conjunction with your vet's advice, dogs can be fed a bland, homecooked diet of white fish, chicken or turkey breast, along with some gently steamed vegetables, such as butternut squash, cabbage, kale, broccoli or courgette, which will provide some fibre. This should be fed for no more than a week or two following recovery.

When switching back to raw, it is important to keep fat levels very low to begin with. We normally recommend keeping fat levels to below 5%, for the first four weeks. If everything is going well, and there are no further episodes, then after a month we suggest switching to a slightly higher-fat diet, but still keeping fat levels below 10%. It is important to avoid giving high fat treats, such as fat laden gravy from human food, and fat rich marrow bones.

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.

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## 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.

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## 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 biologically 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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Parts of this text are revised extracts from *The Complete Book of Cat and Dog Health* (Hubble & Hattie 2019) by Dr Lise Hansen. [www.hubbleandhattie.com](http://www.hubbleandhattie.com)

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.