

Pet Health Handout: Understanding Gastroenteritis

What is Gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is a common and often sudden condition defined as **inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract (stomach and intestines)**. It is essentially an "upset stomach" involving both the stomach (*gastro*) and the intestines (*enteritis*).

Common Signs and Symptoms

The most common signs of gastroenteritis are:

- **Vomiting:** May contain food, bile (foamy, yellowish liquid), or occasionally blood.
- **Diarrhea:** Stools are often soft, watery, or loose, and may be increased in frequency, urgency, or volume. It may contain mucus or blood.
- **Abdominal Pain:** Subtle signs can include pacing, restlessness, reluctance to move, or adopting a "praying position" (front legs down, rear end up).
- **Lethargy:** Decreased energy or excessive tiredness.
- **Anorexia:** Decreased or complete loss of appetite.

Why Does it Happen? (Causes)

Gastroenteritis has many potential causes, which can be grouped into a few categories:

Category	Description and Examples
Dietary Indiscretion	<p>The most common cause in dogs ("eating without discrimination"). Includes scavenging from the trash, eating spoiled food, foreign objects (toys, socks), feces (coprophagia), or too many high-fat human foods/table scraps.</p>
Infectious Agents	<p>Organisms that irritate or infect the gut lining.</p> <p>* Viruses: Such as Canine Parvovirus or Feline Panleukopenia (both severe).</p> <p>* Bacteria: Such as <i>Salmonella</i> or <i>Clostridium</i>.</p> <p>* Parasites: Such as roundworms, hookworms, <i>Giardia</i>, or Coccidia.</p>

Dietary Factors	Sudden changes in food, food allergies/sensitivities, or feeding poor-quality food.
Toxins/Medication	Ingestion of chemicals (e.g., cleaning products, garden chemicals), poisonous plants, or an adverse reaction to certain medications (e.g., some anti-inflammatories).
Underlying Diseases	<p>Gastroenteritis can be a symptom of a more serious underlying condition:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas) * Kidney or Liver Disease * Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) * Certain metabolic disorders
Stress	Changes in routine, travel, or emotional stress can sometimes trigger gut inflammation.

What Makes it Better or Worse?

The goal of treatment is supportive care, which means helping the animal's body recover by managing the symptoms and preventing complications.

Things That Make it WORSE

Factor	Why it Worsens the Condition
Dehydration	The most significant complication. Severe fluid and electrolyte loss from frequent vomiting/diarrhea can lead to shock and be life-threatening, especially in young or old animals.
Continuing Normal Diet	Fatty, rich, or regular food is difficult to digest and will further irritate the inflamed stomach and intestines, prolonging symptoms.

Sudden, Large Intake of Water	An animal that is very thirsty and drinks a large amount of water quickly is very likely to vomit again, increasing dehydration.
Untreated Underlying Cause	If the gastroenteritis is due to a foreign body (requiring surgery) or a severe infection like Parvovirus, symptoms will continue to worsen without specific veterinary intervention.
Vigorous Activity/Stress	Overexertion can stress the body and divert resources away from healing the digestive tract.

Things That Make it BETTER

Strategy	How it Helps Recovery
Fluid Therapy/Hydration	The priority. Replaces lost fluids and electrolytes. This may involve providing small amounts of water/rehydration solution frequently at home, or subcutaneous (under the skin) or intravenous (IV) fluids at the veterinary hospital.
Bland Diet	An easily digestible, low-fat, cooked diet (e.g., plain boiled chicken breast and white rice, or a veterinary-specific GI food) helps rest the digestive tract and allows it to heal.
Anti-Nausea/Anti-Diarrhea Meds	Medications prescribed by your vet can control vomiting (anti-emetics) and help reduce the severity of diarrhea, making the pet feel better and preventing further fluid loss.
Probiotics	Supplements containing beneficial "friendly" gut bacteria can help restore a healthy balance to the intestinal microflora, which is often disrupted by illness.
Rest	Allowing the animal to rest and recover, with minimal exercise, supports the healing process.



When to Contact Your Veterinarian IMMEDIATELY

While many mild cases resolve with supportive home care, **always seek veterinary attention if** your pet shows any of the following signs:

- **Bloody Vomit or Diarrhea** (bright red blood or dark, tarry stool/vomit resembling coffee grounds).
- **Uncontrolled, Persistent Vomiting** (more than 2-3 episodes in a few hours).
- **Signs of Severe Dehydration** (sunken eyes, dry gums, slow skin tent recovery).
- **Extreme Lethargy, Weakness, or Collapse.**
- **Abdominal Pain** that seems severe.
- Symptoms that **do not improve** within 24–48 hours of supportive care.
- If your pet is a **puppy/kitten**, a **senior**, or has a **pre-existing chronic condition**.

Disclaimer: This handout is for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional veterinary medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always consult with your veterinarian regarding your pet's specific health concerns.

