Dogs - Sensitive Stomach

Some dogs seem to have a “sensitive stomach”. They repeatedly have problems with vomiting, diarrhea or they don’t want to eat. If you are lucky to figure out what caused it, you can avoid it in the future. Unfortunately, in many cases, it doesn’t seem like anything changed and suddenly your dog is sick.

Parasites

The first thing I would advise is to check for parasites. Have a stool sample checked when your dog has normal stool. If the test doesn’t show anything, ask your veterinarian for medicine that will get rid of whipworms and Giardia.

Both of these are common parasites that can cause chronic, intermittent diarrhea. Giardia can also cause vomiting. They can be difficult to find on stool exams so this is one time that giving medicine “just in case” is a good idea.

Diet

Next, look at what you are feeding your dog. Start with a high quality, digestible diet. Ones without artificial preservatives or colors are preferred. You don’t really save money with cheap food.

Some dogs can’t tolerate any change in their diet. If you tend to give a few bites of what you are eating, that may be the culprit and all you have to do is stop. Changing the brand of food or treats can also trigger problems if your dog is sensitive. Any changes should be done very gradually over several days.

Avoid the urge to give “just a taste”!

Food Allergies

Some dogs will actually be allergic or intolerant of certain foods. Food allergies will often cause skin and ear problems in addition to or instead of GI problems. It can sometimes be a challenge to figure out which foods are causing the problem.

Some veterinarians will run blood tests to check for food allergies or you need to do an elimination trial. You might be lucky enough to look at the ingredients in your dog’s food, chose a different one and it works. This is more likely if your dog is only sensitive to one ingredient.

The most common foods dogs have problems with are proteins and grain. If your dog is eating food with beef, he might do OK on chicken. Most dogs are sensitive to multiple things, however, and that makes it harder.

If you are giving any chewable medicines (like heartworm pills), they usually have a meat base. Switch to a topical heartworm medicine for a few months to see if that solves the problem. Don’t forget treats and rawhide chews can also cause problems.
Elimination trial

An elimination trial requires you to use a prescription food from your veterinarian that is made for food allergies or a homemade diet.

A homemade diet uses one protein food and one carbohydrate. The important thing is that the foods you pick are ones the dog has never eaten in the past. Venison or rabbit is often used for protein. Fish will work if your dog has never had any fish product. Potatoes are often suggested for the carbohydrate, but many dogs have eaten French fries! You might be better off with barley or oatmeal.

Don’t give any biscuits, treats, or chewable medicines during this time. In addition, no rawhides or pig ears. It’s OK to give certain vegetables (no corn, peas or anything starchy). It is critical that you are very careful about everything your dog eats during this trial period.

You need to feed this diet for 8 weeks to see if symptoms improve. If so, then you can add other foods, one at a time, to the diet and see if it causes a problem. The homemade diet is not balanced so you can’t feed that forever. It would also not be an appropriate diet for a growing puppy.

This is a very laborious process. A prescription diet from your vet can make it easier and will be balanced. Whichever method you use, though, you must follow it closely. That is the only way to see if it helps your dog. If you cheat even once, it messes it up and you are back to square one.

Other types of diets

Some dogs don’t have food allergies but do better on certain types of diets. Some do best on a “bland” very digestible diet, others with a high fiber diet. Trial and error is often the only way to find out. Your veterinarian will have these as prescription diets. I would advise starting with a prescription diet to find out if it works for your dog. After you find what type is best, you can try to find something similar in a store if you prefer.

Stress

All of this becomes more challenging and frustrating when your dog only has episodes sporadically. You think everything’s under control and then, wham, he’s sick again. You don’t think anything has changed to bring it on.

One potential cause to consider is stress. Digestive problems are common when your dog is stressed by people visiting, changes in routine, a vet visit, boarding, anything different in their world. Even getting overly excited can cause problems.

If stress seems to be a cause, try to reduce stressful events. He may benefit from something that has a calming effect. There are several things that may help.

You can use slippery elm bark to reduce the GI signs. Slippery elm is an herb that has a coating and soothing action on the GI tract. It works well for many causes of vomiting, nausea, and diarrhea. It is especially good for dogs that have problems due to stress. You can give it to your dog before a visit to the vet, boarding, or anything else that upsets your dog. It will often prevent a problem from starting.
Other causes

I have seen some dogs that get sick in the morning. It appears that if they go too long without eating, they get an upset stomach. It’s possible they have an acid buildup happening. The solution is often to give them their last meal just before you go to bed.

If they also have problems during the day, multiple small meals throughout the day may help. You can also leave food out all the time if your dog doesn’t overeat. (I never had one of those dogs, but I hear they exist!)

Some dogs seem to have some inflammation in their stomachs that makes them prone to vomiting. They might have a small ulcer. These can be diagnosed with endoscopy, placing a tube into the stomach and taking a look. You can try treating your dog with slippery elm before having tests done.

Dogs can have inflammatory bowel disease. These dogs have bouts of vomiting and/or diarrhea. Biopsies of the intestines are needed to diagnose it. In some cases, your veterinarian may just try treating for it to see if your dog gets better. Slippery elm will also help mild cases.

There can be other causes as well. If your dog isn’t better with the things you’ve tried, see your veterinarian for more testing.

Probiotics

Probiotics are the “good” bacteria in the intestines. I would advise you give these to your dog every day. They will help to keep his GI tract healthier and it boosts his immune system. It may help to avoid some problems or help him recover faster.

Summary

If you are one of the lucky ones, you will figure it out quickly. Often, though, you need patience and persistence. It will take some time to see if food changes have helped.

The good news is that there are things you can try at home before you have to see your vet. However, your vet will help when things aren’t getting better.

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