

CONSTIPATION

Constipation is seen fairly commonly in veterinary medicine, although other gastrointestinal disorders such as vomiting or diarrhoea are more common.

The main signs of constipation in dogs are straining to defaecate with either a small amount or no faeces produced. Faeces produced are generally hard or dry, but occasionally a small amount of liquid stool with mucous and sometimes blood can be passed after prolonged straining. Affected dogs will sometimes also have vomiting, a reduced appetite and depression.

The most common causes of constipation are dietary issues or indiscretions such as consuming bones, hair (more common in cats), foreign material s (sand or stones/gravel), excessive dietary fibre (rare) and inadequate water consumption. A lack of exercise or inability to walk (eg advanced arthritis or limb or pelvic fractures) can be implicated. Occasionally drugs can cause constipation, the most common drugs being opioids like codeine (although this seems to cause constipation less frequently than it does in humans). Painful conditions in the anal region can sometimes lead to constipation in dogs, these can include anal gland abscesses and anal fistulas or strictures. It is not uncommon to see long haired dogs such as Maltese terriers with constipation that has occurred due to massive matting of hair around their anal area. Prostate conditions in entire male dogs can cause constipation due to enlargement of the prostate. Entire male dogs can also develop hernias of the muscles surrounding the anus, leading to chronic constipation in some cases. Less common causes of constipation include tumours, polyps or cancers and disorders affecting the nerves.

Dogs with relatively mild constipation can be treated as an outpatient with various medications including stool softeners and laxatives. Suppository type enemas that are often used in humans (eg Fleet enemas that are inserted rectally) are not often used in dogs and cats as some types can be dangerous. In relatively severe cases, the dog may require heavy sedation or a general anaesthetic for a warm water enema and manual removal of the faeces. I have seen several cases of very severe constipation in which the dog has had to have part of their colon surgically removed. This is very rare, and has a very high complication rate as the colon has a very poor ability to heal. It is very rare for dogs to become this constipated without have an underlying disorder affecting their colonic function. Severe constipation is a lot more common in cats than it is in dogs.

If your dog seems to be prone to constipation I would recommend feeding a high fibre dog food such as Hills Science Diet W/D. Alternatively, adding some bran or psyllium to their food may help (I recommend 'Benefibre' - this can be purchased from supermarkets or chemists). If your dog seems to be prone to constipation after being fed bones, I would recommend reducing the frequency they are fed or avoiding them altogether.

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