



Acute Canine Pancreatitis: Fatty foods are dangerous for dogs!

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During food preparation or when enjoying a meal, there may be a temptation to offer pieces of fatty meat or other high fat foods to our furry family member, but this can be quite risky in dogs.

Unlike humans, many **dogs cannot handle a diet high in fat**. In fact, this can trigger a nasty cascade of life-threatening events, known as **pancreatitis**.

What is pancreatitis?

Pancreatitis is a severe inflammatory disease affecting the pancreas, which is the organ responsible for producing the **enzymes** used in digestion as well as making **insulin**. Usually, the digestive enzymes are activated once they reach the stomach, but in pancreatitis, the powerful digestive enzymes are activated too early, in the pancreas itself, setting up a painful and potentially life-threatening situation known as an acute abdomen.

What are the clinical signs of canine pancreatitis?

Clinical signs of pancreatitis may include some or all of the following:

- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain and/or bloating
- Lethargy
- Fever
- Collapse

How is pancreatitis diagnosed in dogs?

Your vet may suspect pancreatitis if your dog has a history of vomiting after eating a fatty meal, but it can also occur spontaneously in some dogs that are in a higher risk category.

On physical examination, your vet will detect abdominal pain because on palpation, your dog will be very tense rather than relaxed in the abdomen.



Blood testing often reveals a high level of fat in the blood, which is often visible to the naked eye, appearing as a white creamy layer at the top of the blood tube when it is spun in a centrifuge. Some of the other parameters that can be elevated in the blood screen for pancreatitis in dogs include amylase, lipase, bilirubin, ALP and ALT and white blood cells.

The pancreatic specific lipase SNAP test is an in-house test that is usually POSITIVE in dogs with pancreatitis, however, this test can also be positive in dogs without pancreatitis that have an upset tummy.

A consistently reliable and non-invasive screening test for pancreatitis is an abdominal ultrasound performed by an experienced sonographer. This is also a useful test to rule out concurrent disorders that may affect treatment recommendations.

In cases where there is a high suspicion of pancreatitis, supportive treatment, such as anti-vomiting medication and intravenous fluids, can begin without a definitive diagnosis.

Are some dogs more likely to develop pancreatitis?

While all dogs have the potential to develop pancreatitis, some dogs are predisposed and have a lower tolerance to fatty foods, so extra care needs to be taken.

Dogs with a higher risk of pancreatitis include:

- Older female dogs
- Dogs with hyperadrenocorticism (Cushing's syndrome)
- Diabetic dogs
- Dogs with elevated triglycerides (hypertriglyceridaemia)
- Hypothyroidism
- Liver disease
- Insecticide exposure (organophosphates)
- Certain medications: phenobarbitone, azathioprine
- Certain dog breeds: miniature schnauzer, dachshund, miniature poodle, Alaskan malamute, Cavalier King Charles spaniel, cocker spaniel, collie, boxer, laika, Yorkshire terrier, fox terrier

Previously corticosteroids have been implemented as a cause for pancreatitis, but this has since been disproven.

How is canine pancreatitis treated?

Pancreatitis in dogs needs to be treated urgently, usually with anti-vomiting medication, intravenous fluid therapy to correct dehydration and electrolyte imbalances, strong pain relief and sometimes antibiotics if indicated.



Treatment continues until the pancreas settles down and the inflammation has resolved. Without prompt treatment, pancreatitis in some cases can be fatal, so it is important to see your vet immediately if you suspect your dog may have pancreatitis.

If a patient is critical for more than a few days, then nutrition may need to be administered via a feeding tube to bypass the stomach. For critical patients, referral to an emergency or specialist facility with 24/7 care is recommended.

Sometimes a clotting disorder can develop which can cause bleeding issues and these dogs may benefit from a plasma transfusion from a donor dog.

There are new treatments currently being researched and developed for use in canine pancreatitis.

If there is bacterial translocation from the intestines, pancreatic abscesses can develop, which can lead to septic peritonitis, gravely affecting their prognosis and chance of recovery.

Sadly, some dogs still die from pancreatitis, despite receiving gold standard care.

Preventing pancreatitis in dogs: How can I prevent pancreatitis in my dog?

It is best to avoid pancreatitis in the first place by ensuring the human food is out of reach of your dog (including securing the household garbage bin) and not offering your pet the leftovers after Christmas dinner, parties or barbeques.

It is important to investigate what the trigger for pancreatitis was, particularly in older dogs that may have a concurrent disease that predisposes them, such as hypertriglyceridaemia, hypothyroidism or Cushing's syndrome. Your vet may recommend further testing in these cases.

In dogs that have recovered from an episode of pancreatitis, a low fat diet is recommended for life (< 10% fat content on a dry matter basis). This includes prescription diets such as Hills (low fat i/d) and Royal Canin (gastrointestinal low fat) as well as others. It is best to discuss your dog's dietary recommendations with your vet.