

Bloat Hazards and Precautions

Bloat is a stomach enlargement caused by overeating, but stomach enlargement can also be serious.

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Q. Could you please send me information about bloat? I own a Basset Hound and have heard that bloat may be a concern. Lately, she periodically has been gagging and dry heaving after eating or BMs, but seems to recover to the happy dog she usually is. Thanks for your help!

A. The subject of bloat in dogs seems to come up a lot, so I thought I would provide some basic information. Some dog owners may be unnecessarily worrying, while others should be more vigilant to prevent a life threatening condition.

"Bloat" is a general term to describe a big-time enlargement of the stomach. Dogs that are greedy eaters and have access to food may overeat, causing food bloat. Dogs that are excited, anxious or panting a lot may swallow air, causing gas bloat. In both cases, dog owners may notice that their dog's belly seems enlarged, and their dog appears anxious, distressed, uncomfortable, and may be dry-heaving or vomiting. Both of these conditions require an abdominal X-ray to confirm, but they are not life threatening, and usually do not require treatment. Think of them as overeating at your favorite restaurant, or swallowing lots of air if you eat too fast.

In contrast, GDV, or gastric dilatation and volvulus, occurs when a dog's stomach first enlarges with a large meal or intake of water, and then twists on its axis, cutting off the blood supply and preventing the escape of gas in either direction. This is truly a life-threatening condition, and may cause death within several hours, or less, if not treated.

The key point to remember is that it is related mostly to the build of the dog. Large-breed dogs with deep chests are most at risk, because there is room for the stomach to twist. Great Danes are most prone, but German Shepherd Dogs, Labs, Goldens, Rottweilers, Dobermans and other large breed dogs are all at risk.

It's rare, but some smaller dogs, and even puppies, can get GDV, so owners must be vigilant and look for early signs. Early signs of GDV can be obvious or subtle. Some dogs' abdomens get hugely distended, and tympanic like a drum. Other dogs may pace restlessly, and act like they are trying to throw up. Remember, with a true stomach twist your dog will not be able to vomit.