

Choking During Exercise

Airway irritations and sensitivity during exercise.

Michael Abdella, DVM

Q: Whenever I take my dog for a walk she makes this noise like she's choking that really bothers me. We have asked the vets about it and they say its nothing. I know that it's something.

A: The choking you describe seems to be associated with exercise a fairly common situation. It is most likely related to upper airway irritation or problems involving the larynx (voicebox) and trachea. Occasionally, changes in the lungs or heart can also cause signs of choking.

Different things can irritate the upper airway and in many cases multiple irritants are involved. Many untrained or excited dogs experience pressure irritation caused by pulling against leashes and collars. This effect is greatly enhanced when some other type of tracheal irritation already exists. The situation can be eliminated by changing restraint equipment, properly fitting existing equipment or by training the dog not to pull. If this does not apply in your case or if your dog fails to respond to these changes, other causes must be considered. Airway sensitivity can be caused by infections with viruses and bacteria, allergies and mechanical irritants such as dust and foreign bodies. Walking in certain areas can increase exposure to allergic and other irritants avoid those areas when possible. Treatment for these conditions should alleviate the choking, at least on a temporary basis.

Structural changes and weakness in the upper airway often lead to a variety of signs, including wheezing, retching, coughing and choking. Weakening of the cartilaginous tracheal rings can lead to a collapse of the tracheal tube, especially in middle-aged and older Toy and miniature breeds. Medical and surgical intervention can provide some relief in advanced cases.

Damage to certain nerves can cause paralysis or partial paralysis (paresis) of the larynx. This condition most commonly occurs in large breeds, though any dog can be affected. Nerve damage can be caused by trauma, infection, inflammation and cancers of the neck and/or chest. Hormonal diseases such as low thyroid (hypothyroidism) can play a role in certain cases. An underlying cause is not identified in most cases of laryngeal paralysis. Treatment is aimed at underlying causes when they can be identified. Avoiding strenuous and exciting activity can provide excellent control in mild and moderate cases, but more advanced cases usually require surgical treatment.

Other causes of coughing and choking are airway growths such as polyps, cysts, abscesses, granulomas and tumors. Hypoplastic (smaller than normal) tracheas can be seen in certain breeds of dogs, especially those with a brachycephalic skull type, such as Bulldogs.

Dogs with signs of choking should be examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible if the signs are not obviously caused by collar pressure on the trachea.