

Pancreatitis Can Be Very Serious in Dogs

An expert answers your canine healthcare questions.

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Q. I have a 5-year-old spayed Akita who recently had a pancreatitis attack. She was treated for one attack but had a second within a week. Frequent vomiting was my main concern. The second attack required hospitalization, and intravenous fluids and antibiotics for four days. Blood work abdomen and X-rays supported pancreatitis. Suki wouldn't touch her prescription intestinal diet. She seemed to be doing better but then started vomiting blood. My vet prescribed carafate (a stomach-coating agent) and a continued bland diet. After three weeks, Suki improved. Will she be prone to future attacks? I'm careful about treats; she eats a lamb-and-rice diet and lamb-and-rice biscuits. Are rawhides bad for her? I'm also worried about diabetes.

A. Your concerns are well founded. Pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas) is unpredictable. Any dog can develop the disease, but it's generally found in middle-aged and older dogs. Females seem more prone to it than do males, but not all studies support that impression. Certain breeds (Schnauzers and Cocker Spaniels in particular) seem predisposed. Dogs treated for pancreatitis are commonly overweight or obese.

The pancreas, located in the middle of the abdomen behind the liver and stomach, has two main functions; it releases enzymes that enable food digestion and absorption, and produces insulin, which controls blood sugar levels.

Pancreatitis occurs when enzymes are prematurely released or activated within the pancreas, or when activated enzymes return to the pancreas from the intestine.

Enzyme action injures pancreatic tissue. The damaged pancreas releases toxins, inflammatory debris and digestive enzymes, which trigger complications and illness with other body systems, hence the unpredictability. The inflamed pancreas may develop bacterial infection, which can spread or cause pancreatic abscesses.

Common symptoms including lethargy, decreased appetite, abdominal pain, vomiting and diarrhea. Vomit and bowel movements often contain blood, as you've noted. The condition may rapidly progress to severe dehydration, shock and collapse. Many factors cause pancreatitis attacks. Obesity and ingestion of rich, fatty, spicy or new foods can cause them. I have seen pancreatitis in dogs after they've eaten oatmeal cookies, steak fat, garbage, spicy beans, certain prescription and nonprescription diets, and many other foods. Other possible culprits include drugs (such as corticosteroids), chemotherapy, trauma or surgical manipulation of the pancreas, infections, and certain hormonal and immune conditions.