

BLOAT and GASTRIC TORSION

Large breeds are prone to GASTRIC DILATATION-VOLVULUS (GDV), commonly known as "bloat," a true medical emergency.

What is bloat?

Imagine an inflated balloon, one-third of the inside space occupied with water. As the balloon is moved, the water moves, eventually twisting the balloon on its axis. In the dog's stomach, motility or movement of food during the process of digestion stops for unknown reasons. The stagnant food begins to ferment forming gas-producing bacteria. The stomach continues to expand with gas until it twists, cutting off the blood supply to surrounding organs and, in some cases, rupturing. Almost every breed of dog is affected by GDV, but the condition is more common in large breeds.

Which breeds are susceptible to bloat?

The Great Dane, Weimaraner, Saint Bernard, Gordon Setter, Irish Setter, Irish Wolfhound, Akita, Boxer, Borzoi, Bloodhound, Mastiff and Bullmastiff seem to be especially susceptible to this disorder. However, it does occur in all large breeds.

What causes bloat?

The exact cause of GDV has never been resolved but theories abound. One theory claims some dogs are born with their stomachs slightly out of position allowing it to twist more easily. Another theory speculates affected dogs are born with impairment of either the esophagus or pylorus, effectively preventing food from leaving the stomach. Dogs that gulp food and then exercise heavily may also be at increased risk. Some dogs under extreme anxiety suffer "stress-related bloat" by gulping large amounts of air when nervous. Tumors of the spleen, stomach, kidney or other internal organs, may cause twisting and subsequently result in bloat. Eating indigestible materials like clothing or garbage may also cause bloating.

How likely is my dog to suffer from bloat?

Studies have been ongoing at many veterinary schools for decades but the exact cause(s) remains a mystery. The frequency of bloat has been estimated at 2.9 to 6.8 cases per 1,000 dogs. Dogs seven years and older appear to be twice as likely to bloat as dogs among 2 and 4 years old. Purebred dogs are 3 times more likely to bloat than mixed breeds. Dogs with narrow and deep thoracic cavities appear to be more prone to bloat.

What are the signs and symptoms of bloat?

Since total prevention is not possible until an exact etiology is determined, treatment is the only means of saving the life of your dog. The earliest clinical signs of a dog suffering bloat include:

- Restlessness. The dog will act anxious, agitated, uncomfortable, and unable to rest.

- Loss of appetite. It may not be interested in food or water, though some dogs try to drink.
- It may vomit once or twice followed by nonproductive retching and gagging. It may attempt to defecate.
- Whining, crying, heavy panting, and salivation accompany the physical distress.

As the condition accelerates, the abdomen begins to swell noticeably from the accumulation of gas in the stomach. In most cases of GDV, the stomach twists 180-360 degrees making it impossible for the pressure to be released without medical intervention. The condition is rapidly fatal, causing shock, coma, and death within minutes or hours.

What should I do if my dog shows signs of bloat?

If your dog exhibits any of the above mentioned symptoms, transport the animal to your vet or to an Emergency Clinic without delay. Treatment is aimed at stabilizing shock, and relieving gas pressure. Surgery should be performed to turn the stomach back to its normal position, remove necrotic tissue and finally, to tack the stomach (gastropexy) to prevent a recurrence of torsion. Once a dog bloats, it will bloat again and torsion or twisting will recur if surgery is not performed following the first GDV episode.

Twenty-nine to thirty-three percent of all dogs with GDV die. Survival depends on how quickly the owners get the dog in for emergency care, how experienced your veterinarian is in treating the disease, and luck. Shock, heart arrhythmias, a build-up of metabolic poisons and post-operative infection are the primary causes of death with GDV. These dangerous post-bloat effects can occur for at least 7 days following the GDV episode and surgery.

Risk factors include eating habits, exercise, genetic predisposition, behavior or lifestyle, and environmental influences. The only chance a dog has to make it through GDV depends on the owner's awareness of the condition, observation of symptoms and a swift response. Be sure you know what hours your vet is open and exactly where the closest Emergency Clinic can be found. You should discuss medical emergencies with your vet BEFORE they occur so you can be prepared.

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