Diarrhea in Cats

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

What is diarrhea?
Diarrhea is the rapid movement of ingested material through the intestine, resulting in one or more of the following: increased frequency of bowel movements, loose stools, or increased amount of stool.

If my cat has diarrhea, when should I call my veterinarian?
If your cat has diarrhea, call your veterinarian. Your veterinarian will ask you a series of questions to determine how severe the diarrhea is. It will be helpful for your veterinarian to know when the diarrhea started, how many bowel movements your cat has had, what they look like, and if your cat is uncomfortable. It is especially important that you call your veterinarian immediately if your cat:

- Has blood in the diarrhea or the stools are black or tarry
- You suspect your cat may have eaten something toxic or poisonous
- Your cat has a fever, is depressed, or dehydrated
- Your cat's gums are pale or yellow
- Your cat is a kitten or has not received all his vaccinations
- Your cat appears to be in pain
- Your cat is also vomiting

Do not give your cat any medications, including over-the-counter human medications unless advised by your veterinarian to do so.

How is the cause of diarrhea diagnosed?
There are many causes of diarrhea (See Table 2. Causes, Diagnosis and Treatment of Diarrhea in Cats). It is important to determine the cause so the appropriate treatment can be given. Your veterinarian will combine information from you, the physical exam, and possibly laboratory and other diagnostic tests to determine the cause of the diarrhea.

Localization of symptoms - Since there are so many causes of diarrhea, it first helps to determine which part of the intestine is most likely involved. By localizing the diarrhea to the small or large intestine, the number of possible causes can be narrowed down. To do this, your veterinarian will need information related to what particular symptoms are occurring, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Symptoms of diarrhea due to a small intestine disease versus a large intestine disease

Symptom	Small Intestine Diarrhea	Large Intestine Diarrhea
Volume of stool	Increased	Normal or slightly increased or decreased
Frequency of bowel movements	Normal to increased	Usually very increased
Straining	Uncommon	Common
Blood present	Uncommon; digested blood may result in black, tarry stools	Common; fresh red blood is seen
Mucous present	No	Large amount common
Weight loss	Common	Uncommon
Vomiting	Possible	Uncommon
Increased gas	Possible	Uncommon

Onset of symptoms - How suddenly the symptoms appeared is also a good clue to what the cause of the diarrhea may be. If the symptoms appeared suddenly, the condition is called "acute". If the symptoms remain over a long period of time (weeks), the diarrhea is called "chronic". If the symptoms appear, go away, and then come back again over several weeks, the diarrhea is considered "intermittent."

Medical History - Your veterinarian will ask about your cat's medical history including vaccinations, what type of wormer the cat has received and how often, contact with other animals (including wildlife), diet, any access to garbage or toxins, and any medications. The more information you can offer, the easier it will be to make a diagnosis.

Physical examination - Your veterinarian will do a complete physical exam including taking your cat's temperature, checking the heart and respiration, looking in the mouth, palpating the abdomen, and checking for dehydration.

Laboratory and diagnostic tests - In almost all cases of diarrhea, your veterinarian will recommend a fecal flotation. This is a test to check for parasites such as worms or Giardia. If a bacterial infection is suspected, a fecal culture and sensitivity are performed.

If the cat is showing signs of illness, a complete blood count and chemistry panel are often recommended. Usually blood tests to check for the presence of feline leukemia virus (FeLV) to and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) are also recommended. Other special blood tests may also be conducted if certain diseases are suspected.

Radiographs (x-rays) are appropriate if a tumor, foreign body, or anatomical problem is suspected. Other diagnostic imaging such as a barium series or ultrasound may also be helpful. Examinations using an endoscope or colonoscopy may be indicated.

For some diseases, the only way to make an accurate diagnosis is to obtain a biopsy and have it examined microscopically.

How is diarrhea treated?
Because there are so many causes of diarrhea, the treatment will vary (See Table 2. Causes, Diagnosis and Treatment of Diarrhea in Cats).

In many cases of simple diarrhea in adult cats, it is recommended to withhold food for 12-24 hours, and provide small amounts of water frequently. Then, a bland diet such as boiled (fat-free) chicken and rice is offered in small amounts. If the diarrhea does not recur, the cat is slowly switched back to his normal diet over the course of several days.

For some cases of diarrhea, it may be necessary to modify the diet permanently. Special foods may need to be given as a way to avoid certain ingredients, add fiber to the diet, decrease the fat intake, or increase digestibility.

If parasites are present, the appropriate wormer and/or other medication will be prescribed. Few wormers kill every kind of parasite, so it is very important that the appropriate wormer be selected. In most cases it is necessary to repeat the wormer one or more times over several weeks or months. It is also important to try to remove the worm eggs from the environment. The fecal flotation test looks for worm eggs, and if no eggs are being produced, the test could be negative even though worms could be present. For this reason, in some cases, even if the fecal flotation test is negative, a wormer may still be prescribed.

If dehydration is present, it is usually necessary to give the cat intravenous or subcutaneous fluids. Oral fluids are often not adequate since they pass through the animal too quickly to be absorbed properly.

Antibiotics are given if the diarrhea is caused by bacteria. They may also be given if the intestine has been damaged (eg., blood in the stool would indicate an injured intestine) and there is a chance that the injury could allow bacteria from the intestine into the blood stream, possibly causing severe disease (septicemia).

In some cases, medications may be given to decrease motility, ie., slow down the rate at which the intestine moves ingested material through. These drugs should not be given if the cat could have ingested a toxin or may have a bacterial infection, so it is always important to have an accurate diagnosis before use of these drugs.

Table 2. Causes, diagnosis and treatment of diarrhea

Cause	Example	Cats Most at Risk	Symptoms	Diagnosis	Treatment	Prognosis

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Diet change	Changing cat food brand or feeding a high fat meal	Those switching from a consistent diet	Usually no other signs of being ill	History and physical exam; tests (eg., fecal flotation) to rule out other causes	Withhold food then switch to bland diet and then slowly back to normal diet	Excellent
Food intolerance or sensitivity	Sensitivity to or inability to digest or absorb certain foods such as milk		Sudden onset of diarrhea, sometimes with gas	Response to removing ingredient from diet and then adding it again	Withhold food then switch to diet without the offending ingredient	Very good if diet can be corrected
Intestinal parasites	Roundworms	Kittens	Diarrhea, weight loss, poor growth	Fecal flotation exam	Multiple treatments with appropriate wormer; decontaminate environment	Excellent with treatment
	Hookworms	Kittens	Diarrhea, vomiting, weakness, pale gums, dehydration, anemia, swollen abdomen, black and tarry stools	Fecal flotation exam	Multiple treatments with appropriate wormer; decontaminate environment	Excellent with treatment
	Cryptosporidia	Younger cats and those who are immuno-suppressed or have other intestinal problems, eg., *Giardia*	Diarrhea	Detection in feces through an ELISA or IFA test	Treat any underlying disease; no proven treatment for cryptosporidiosis	Symptoms usually go away on their own, but cat may remain infected
	Tritrichomonas	Young cats, usually in animal shelters or catteries where animals are crowded	Chronic soft stools, diarrhea with mucus and straining	Microscopic examination of feces; culture; PCR test	Ronidazole	Very good for individual cat, but very hard to eliminate from a cattery
	Coccidia	Kittens and those who are immuno-suppressed and kept in crowded conditions	Diarrhea with mucus and sometimes blood	Fecal flotation exam	Sulfa antibiotics	Very good
	Giardia	Usually young cats or those who are immuno-suppressed	Mild to severe soft diarrhea with mucus and a bad odor; weight loss, abdominal pain and vomiting; often intermittent	ELISA test on feces; fecal flotation exam or microscopic exam of feces; difficult to diagnose - often need multiple samples over several days	Metronidazole or possible fenbendazole; bathing and sanitation to remove *Giardia* from coat and environment	Very good but reinfection commonly occurs
Bacterial infection	*Salmonella, E. coli, Clostridia, Campylobacter*	Young cats or those who are immuno-suppressed	Mild to severe bloody diarrhea with loss of appetite, depression, fever and vomiting	Fecal culture and sensitivity	Antibiotics; intravenous fluids and supportive care in more serious conditions	Good; guarded if infection enters the blood stream (septicemia) or toxins are produced (endotoxemia or entertoxemia)

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Viral infections	Panleukopenia (feline distemper)	Young cats who have not received full series of feline distemper vaccinations and those who are immuno-suppressed	Acute diarrhea, loss of appetite, fever, depression, vomiting, dehydration, abdominal pain	History, physical exam, white blood cell count	Intravenous fluids, antibiotics to prevent secondary bacterial infection, withhold food and water	Guarded, especially in young cats
	Feline leukemia virus (FeLV)	Young cats and outdoor cats	Loss of appetite, chronic diarrhea, vomiting, weight loss; may also see many other signs related to disease in other organs	FeLV test; History and physical exam; tests (eg., fecal flotation) to rule out other causes	Supportive	Poor
	Feline immuno-deficiency virus (FIV)	Adult cats and outdoor cats	Loss of appetite, chronic diarrhea, weight loss; may also see many other signs related to disease in other organs	FIV test; History and physical exam; tests (eg., fecal flotation) to rule out other causes	Supportive	Poor
	Feline corona virus (FCoV)	Young cats, cats in catteries	Diarrhea and possible vomiting	History and physical exam; tests (eg., fecal flotation) to rule out other causes; FCoV antibody test, electron microscopy or PCR	None	Symptoms usually go away on their own; however infection could develop into feline infectious peritonitis (FIP)
	Feline Infectious Peritonitis (FIP)	Young cats, cats in catteries; may be genetic susceptibility in some breeds	Diarrhea, fever, lethargy, loss of appetite, weight loss	History, physical exam, analysis of abdominal fluid, CBC and serum chemistry	Supportive care	Poor
Toxins	Heavy metals, poisonous plants	Those left unattended or unsupervised	Loss of appetite, depression, vomiting, dehydration, abdominal pain	History and physical exam; tests (eg., fecal flotation) to rule out other causes; testing of feces or vomit for presence of toxin	Depends on toxin	Depends on toxin
Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO); also called antibiotic resistant diarrhea		Cats with other intestinal problems	Intermittent watery diarrhea, poor growth or weight loss, increased gas, sometimes vomiting	History, physical exam, intestinal biopsy, tests (eg., fecal flotation) to rule out other causes, ultrasound, blood tests (eg., serum folate and cobalamin, bile acids)	Antibiotics (at least 4-6 weeks); modify diet	Guarded; depends on underlying cause

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Cancer	Lymphoma, adenocarcinoma	Middle-age or older	Chronic diarrhea, weight loss, poor appetite; may see vomiting and dark, tarry stools	History, physical exam, intestinal biopsy	Chemotherapy or surgery depending upon the type of tumor	Poor
Exocrine pancreatic insufficiency		Cats with a history of pancreatitis	Yellowish or gray feces sometimes with greasy appearance, increased gas, increased appetite, weight loss	Serum trypsin-like immuno-reactivity (a blood test)	Pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy; antibiotics to prevent bacterial overgrowth; cobalamin; sometimes diet modification	Lifelong treatment required
Idiopathic inflammatory bowel disease	Granulomatous enteritis, eosinophilic gastro-enterocolitis, or lymphocytic/ plasmacytic enteritis (LPE)	Middle-age	Chronic vomiting and diarrhea possibly with blood and/or mucus; sometimes straining, mild weight loss, and/or black and tarry stools, constipation	History, physical exam, intestinal biopsy, tests (eg., fecal flotation) to rule out other causes	Modify diet; wormers and antibiotics to treat or prevent hidden infections; probiotics; anti-inflammatory drugs; immuno-suppressing drugs if no response to other treatment	Guarded
Intestinal obstruction	Foreign body, intussusception		Diarrhea, vomiting, loss of appetite; as progresses see depression, possible abdominal pain	Radiographs or barium series; ultrasound; exploratory surgery	Surgery	Good if treated promptly; poorer if intestine has been perforated
Irritable bowel syndrome		Anxious cats and those under stress	Diarrhea with mucus, blood, and increased straining	History, physical exam, intestinal biopsy, tests (eg., fecal flotation) to rule out other causes	Highly digestible diet with increased soluble fiber; motility medications; decrease anxiety; anti-anxiety medications	Guarded
Garbage ingestion or scavenging		Outdoor cats and those left unattended or unsupervised	Diarrhea, vomiting	History and physical exam	Withhold food then switch to bland diet and then slowly back to normal diet	Excellent
Systemic disease	Kidney disease, liver disease, diabetes mellitus	Older cats	Depression; often vomiting and dehydration; sometimes increased or decreased drinking and urination	History, physical exam, intestinal biopsy, tests (eg., fecal flotation) to rule out other causes; complete blood count and chemistry panel	Varies with organ system affected; maintain hydration	Depends on organ system affected
Hyperthyroidism		Middle-age to older cats	Increased appetite, weight loss, hyperactivity, increased volume of stools with greasy appearance	Blood test for T4 hormone	Treatment of hyperthyroidism with methimazole, surgery, or radiation	Good with proper treatment

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Pancreatitis		Siamese may be predisposed	Diarrhea, fever, weight loss, vomiting, weakness	History, physical exam, CBC and serum chemistry, blood test for TLI, biopsy	Supportive, including fluids	Depends on severity
Hypo-cobalaminemia (low blood levels of cobalamin)	Occurs as a result of severe small intestine disease; diarrhea will not resolve until cobalamin replenished	Cats with history of severe small intestinal disease	Diarrhea that is nonresponsive to therapy	Blood cobalamin level	Cobalamin supplementation	Good if underlying disease can be successfully treated
Fungal infections	Histoplasmosis		Diarrhea	Biopsy	Itraconazole; supportive care	Guarded
Short bowel syndrome		Cats who have had portions of the small intestine surgically removed	Diarrhea unresponsive to therapies	History of previous intestinal surgeries	Diet modification, cobalamin supplementation, medications to slow movement of food through the intestines	Guarded
Cause	**Example**	**Cats Most at Risk**	**Symptoms**	**Diagnosis**	**Treatment**	**Prognosis**

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