

Infectious Enteritis: A Cause of Diarrhea in Dogs & Puppies

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Enteritis is the term used to describe an inflammation or infection of the small intestine. In the dog, many bacteria and viruses have been implicated as a cause of enteritis. Among them are parvovirus, coronavirus, rotavirus, salmonellosis, distemper virus and many others. Most of these organisms affect other areas of the body as well, however, some of their principle signs of infection are associated with the small intestine.

What are the symptoms?

Diarrhea is the most common sign associated with small intestine diseases. With enteritis, the temperature is commonly elevated. However, especially with viruses, this is not always the case. A characteristic fetid odor from the feces is usually detected. Contrary to popular belief, one cannot differentiate diarrhea caused by Parvovirus from other sources without sophisticated laboratory testing. The diarrhea from these various causes may all smell similar. The diarrhea may be green and profuse, almost like pea soup. If the intestinal wall is damaged from the infection, one may also notice blood in the stool. If the blood is from the first portions of the small intestine (duodenum), it may be digested and appear black or tar-like. If the bleeding is occurring near the colon, it may appear red.

What are the risks?

Any dog with an intestinal infection should be considered ill, sometimes seriously so. Depending on the cause, the recovery period may be days to weeks. Occasionally dogs will die, especially if younger than six months of age. All ages of dogs can develop diseases such as Parvovirus or coronavirus, though the death rate is higher in young and older dogs. Most organisms are highly contagious and an outbreak may involve many animals in the household and vicinity at one time.

What is the management?

A mild bout of infectious enteritis may require no treatment at all. The dog may have only a mild diarrhea for one or two days, then spontaneously recover. In more severe instances, the dog will need medication to stop or control the diarrhea.

Dehydration is one of the most important symptoms which must be treated. Supportive nutrients and fluids are administered intravenously or subcutaneously until the dog recovers. Antibiotics are helpful if the cause is a bacterium. Antibiotics also help prevent bacteria from secondarily complicating viral diseases such as Parvovirus. Kaopectate and other intestinal coating agents are beneficial in mild cases. In severe cases, to prevent dehydration, medication which slows down the secretions and movements of the intestinal tract can also be administered. The exact treatment varies by age, cause and severity. Dogs with infectious enteritis should be monitored closely.

CAUTION: Some Kaopectate includes bismuth salicylate as an ingredient. This should not be used in cats unless directed by your veterinarian. Dogs that may have an allergy to aspirin, or are taking aspirin, steroids, or another non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) such as Rimadyl, EtoGesic, or Deramaxx should not be given the formulation with bismuth salicylate unless directed by a veterinarian.