

Sneezing & Nasal Discharge in Dogs & Puppies

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When we sneeze, it is usually caused by something such as an allergy or the ever present 'common cold.' Sneezing is defined as a 'sudden expulsion of air through the nasal passageways and mouth.' It is an effort of the body to eliminate the source of irritation within the nose or pharynx. This latter area is the common crossroads of the digestive and respiratory systems, or as one of our clients said 'where the air we breathe passes the food we swallow.' There are many causes of irritations in these areas. Examples would be a cold or sinus infection, inflammation brought on by pollen grain allergies or paint fumes, or inhaled foreign bodies such as rug fibers or grass that are caught in the nose.



In dogs, all the same reasons for sneezing apply. Most dogs do not exhibit this behavior as often as we do, but it does occur and is frequently a cause of some concern. Although their noses are shaped differently, the same basic anatomical features exist as in humans. Their nasal passageway can be much longer than ours (*as in a Collie*) or relatively short (*as seen in the Pug*). The digestive and respiratory systems still cross in a common pharynx. Dogs are also equipped with those excellent sources of headache and congestion, the sinuses.

Causes of sneezing in dogs

Excessive sneezing in dogs is usually caused by allergies, infections, foreign bodies, or tumors. They are all very different and present predictable signs and patterns.

If your dog ever has a bloody nose, always contact your veterinarian.

Allergies: Allergies are usually seasonal and the most common ones are in response to pollen grains and other plant fibers. Tree pollens are most abundant in the late spring and early summer, grass pollen is usually a mid-summer ordeal, while the weeds and other plants generally liberate their pollen in the fall. Each type is present for only two to four weeks. Since a dog is usually only allergic to one of these, sneezing is limited to a certain period. Combine the sneezing with some watering of the eyes, chewing on the feet, and scratching on his sides, and that is about all you need for a diagnosis. There are a few animals that are allergic to things that are inhaled such as rug fibers or cigarette smoke. In these cases, it is fairly easy to recognize the relationship between the sneezing and the presence of these types of allergens.

With any allergy-induced sneezing it will be bilateral, which means that it affects both the right and left nasal passageways. There will be a discharge from both nostrils, however, there will rarely be any blood or pus-like material in this discharge.

Patients with allergies suffer but generally show no other signs. They eat, drink, and remain as active as they always were. Infections that cause sneezing are probably more common in humans than in dogs. Our canine friends have nothing comparable to our common cold that affects their nasal passages. Their most common respiratory infection is Kennel Cough Syndrome, but it affects the throat and windpipe, resulting in a hacking cough, that is without sneezing.

Infections: Infections that do induce sneezing in the dog are usually more serious. It may be an infection from a tooth or its root that protrudes upward and drains into the nose. There are infections that occur on membranes within the nose or sinuses, but with rare exceptions, they are just pathological organisms that happen to end up there and are not limited to this area of the body (*as is the cold virus in humans*). Dogs that suffer from a bacterial, viral, or fungal infection of the nose can have the condition at any time of the year. In most cases they turn into long term, chronic conditions. There is almost always a bloody or pus-like discharge from the nose and it may affect one side only or both sides.

Foreign Bodies: Foreign bodies, a picturesque term referring to an inanimate object that has gained access to the dog's body, can cause some horrendous sneezing fits in the dog. As an explanation of this phenomenon, let us tell you about a case that we treated a few months ago. An elderly client brought a Rottweiler into the clinic that was sneezing about 10 to 20 times per minute. The sneezing had been occurring for three days and the dog only stopped to eat, drink, and maybe take a very brief nap. The animal was totally exhausted. There was some blood coming from the left nostril on some sneezes and a lot of blood at other times. We sedated the animal, gave him a short-acting anesthetic agent, and looked up the left nasal opening with a small, lighted probe. About an inch back from the external opening, we saw a dark spot that should not have been there. Using a small alligator clamp we reached back, attached it to the dark phantom dot, and pulled out a 5 " stick. That is absolutely right 5 " long. The next time you look at a Rottweiler from the side, try to figure out where the stick was. What probably happened was the dog was charging through the woods chasing something and accidentally ran the stick up his nose. After administering injections of an anti-inflammatory medication and antibiotics, we sent the pet home with his owner. Within a day, he was back to his normal self.

Over the years of our veterinary practice, we have removed from the noses of dogs lots of sticks, a few dead insects, some string, Christmas tinsel, a paper clip, and much more we have forgotten. Finding a foreign body in the nose of a dog is not a rare occurrence. It always causes sneezing and there is usually some blood in the nasal discharge. As would be expected, this discharge only comes from the injured side of the nose.

Tumors: In the older dog, usually eight years of age or older, we may encounter another cause of sneezing a tumor. They are not very common, but we still see two or three cases every year. Dogs with an intranasal tumor usually exhibit a bloody

discharge from only one side and the sneezing, unlike the animal with a foreign body, starts out as only an occasional occurrence. Over a period of several weeks or months it becomes more frequent. It is a slow process, causing no rapid changes within the area. These tumors are typically malignant and therefore difficult to treat. Surgery and chemotherapy are always available, but surgical intervention in this area of the body is extremely difficult.

Unlike people, if your dog ever has a bloody nose it is always cause to see the veterinarian. And if sneezing is causing discomfort for the animal or concern for you, a visit to the veterinarian is also recommended. Chances are that it probably won't be anything serious but, like so many conditions, the sooner treatment is initiated, the easier it is to eliminate the problem.