



What is it?

Gastrointestinal disorders are a broad category of pet illness which includes several different conditions that can present with similar symptoms. These symptoms can range from vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, anorexia (lack of appetite), abdominal pain, or discomfort, just to name a few.

What are the possible causes?

Gastrointestinal upset can be categorized as either acute meaning the symptoms are short-term and often only require supportive care or chronic where the symptoms last for weeks due to the pet having an underlying medical condition that needs to be diagnosed and treated appropriately.

One of the most common causes of acute digestive upset is dietary indiscretion, which is when your pet eats something that they shouldn't. This could be anything that is not their regular diet, such as excess or high fat treats, human food, getting into the garbage, or even eating something outside such as feces, carcasses, stagnant water, or foreign materials like wood chips. Acute gastrointestinal upset can also be caused by an abrupt dish-to-dish diet change when starting your pet on a new food. This is why it is always recommended to transition your pet's nutrition slowly, over a period of 1-2 weeks.

Other causes of acute or chronic gastrointestinal upset could be related to stress and anxiety, parasite overload, viral or bacterial infections from outdoor water sources or raw meats, foreign object ingestion causing a partial or full obstruction, food allergies or intolerances, a secondary cause from other illnesses or even a poor reaction to vaccinations or medications.

Diagnosis.

There are a large range of causes for gastrointestinal upset in our pets and visiting your veterinarian is the first step to finding a solution. Your pet's clinical signs and nutritional history will help determine whether the next step should include a range of helpful diagnostics or whether a diet trial is a reasonable first step. If diagnostic testing is recommended, your veterinarian may request to run a fecal sample in the clinic or send a fecal sample to a specialized laboratory for a bacterial culture or viral screening. Some patients may require additional diagnostic testing such as radiographs, abdominal ultrasound, and bloodwork to check for more complicated underlying causes.

Most acute cases of diarrhea will resolve within a few days when given supportive care and if there are no signs of clinical illness your veterinarian may not prescribe antibiotics. This helps minimize the possibility of antimicrobial resistance, the same as with humans. If no medications are prescribed, follow your veterinarian's recommendations on how to best feed and hydrate your pet during this time. Keep in mind, if symptoms last longer than three days or they are accompanied by vomiting, lethargy, or anorexia, contact your veterinarian for a recheck, especially for young or small pets.



How can nutrition help?

There are a variety of veterinary therapeutic gastrointestinal diets designed to help address the diversity of different underlying causes of gastrointestinal upset. The specific nutrient balances and dietary supplements of each diet vary depending on the targeted gastrointestinal treatment. Therefore, your veterinarian will help you choose a specific nutritional approach dependant on your pet's suspected underlying condition.

These specialized diets are created and guaranteed to be highly digestible, so that your pet can easily absorb the available nutrients, reducing the length of time they are symptomatic.

- Therapeutic gastrointestinal diets have controlled levels of highly digestible fats and high-quality proteins to provide energy and ensure nutrient absorption.
- Some gastrointestinal varieties will have a higher calorie and digestibility level to compensate for your pet's decrease in appetite and reduced food volume intake during their illness.
- Each diet will have a carefully measured soluble and insoluble fiber balance to help regulate stool quality and manage fiber responsive conditions.
- These diets contain Omega-3 fatty acids help to break the cycle of inflammation.
- Gastrointestinal diets are specially designed to activate the gut microbiome and help restore GI microbiome balance with the addition of prebiotic fibres.
- Some select diets even contain anti-stress formulas designed for small dogs who have gastrointestinal symptoms because of anxiety.
- Gastrointestinal diets are guaranteed to have high quality ingredients and great taste to help with patient acceptance during gastrointestinal distress.
- These diets can be fed long term to manage chronic cases and minimize risk of recurrence of acute cases.
- Hypoallergenic diets are often recommended for patients with chronic enteritis and cases that do not respond to gastrointestinal diets for cases of Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) or to rule out Adverse Food Reactions (AFR).

Depending on the diagnosis of your pet's gastrointestinal upset they may need a diet that is low in fat, whereas other patients may benefit from moderate fat levels. The same goes for fiber type and concentration and calorie levels. It is important to get advice from your veterinarian to narrow down the best recommendation to help manage your pet's specific symptoms and underlying illness.



Tips and tricks

As there are many different causes of gastrointestinal upset, it is in your pet's best interest to contact your veterinarian if any issues arise. They will be able to help you find the best solution and resolution to your pet's discomfort.

- For dogs and cats with gastrointestinal upsets, we generally recommend feeding small, frequent amounts of the recommended diet. This ensures we do not overload their irritated system which allows for optimal digestion.
- Once your pet is able to keep food down, or in the case of only diarrhea, it is recommended to feed their normal daily calorie ration broken up and spread out over 4-6 meals throughout the day.
- Keep up water intake as vomiting and diarrhea can easily lead to dehydration. Ask your veterinarian for additional advice.
- In the past you may have heard that fasting your pet was the best option for helping gastrointestinal issues, but according to studies, withholding food from an animal with diarrhea will actually lengthen the time taken for the animal to get well. This is because the gastrointestinal system gets its own nutrients for healing and repair from the food that the pet consumes, not from the blood stream.
- Generally, we do not recommend feeding homecooked 'bland' foods, as there is no evidence that suggests these foods help gastrointestinal upsets.
- These simple homecooked diets are often deficient in half of the essential nutrients your pet requires and are usually low in fiber. If a bland home prepared diet is being used it should not be offered for more than 2-3 days to avoid nutritional imbalances and delayed recovery.
- Despite common belief, pumpkin is not a concentrated source of fiber as it is 90% water. It is best to talk to your veterinarian regarding safe high quality fiber sources for your pet.
- If you have chosen not to use a veterinary therapeutic diet designed for gastrointestinal upset, it is better for your pet to remain on its normal daily diet (unless wholly unsuitable) than be changed to an unproven secondary option.
- If you are currently unable to feed a gastrointestinal diet, your veterinarian may prescribe supplemental prebiotics and probiotics to help with the resolution of symptoms.

Be prepared at home

If disaster strikes and your pet begins to suffer from gastrointestinal upset, it is important to call your veterinarian to decide the next best steps for resolution. Remember, never give your pet human medications without consulting your veterinarian because many over-the-counter medications that work well for people can be toxic to animals.