

I have an 8 year old standard poodle. A friend's German Shepherd had to have emergency surgery for "bloat". Her dog almost died and the surgery was very expensive. What is "bloat", and is there anything I can do to prevent it in my dog?

"Bloat" is a common term used for the condition known as gastric dilatation and volvulus (GDV). A stomach full of food and gas becomes twisted resulting in its blood supply being cut off and blockage of the exit route for the contents of the stomach. This results in an extremely painful emergency situation.

When a dog eats it is normal for him to swallow air with the food. If he eats quickly, even more air is swallowed. For some reason, the full stomach will occasionally rotate. When this occurs, the esophagus, where food and water enter the stomach, twists and the first section of the small intestine becomes stretched, compressed and somewhat twisted also. This process effectively blocks both directions for exit of material from the stomach.

Blood vessels to the stomach also become stretched when it twists and may tear. This causes the stomach wall to begin to die. In addition, blood vessels between the stomach and spleen are damaged, which can reduce the blood supply to the spleen as well. Furthermore the distended stomach can block blood from the rest of the abdomen from returning to the heart. Combined with toxins released from the dying tissue and shock, life-threatening heart rhythm abnormalities soon result.

Despite the serious nature of GDV, it is possible for a dog to survive provided he gets prompt veterinary attention. If you ever notice your dog's abdomen is hard and/or distended, and he/she is retching but little is coming up, seek veterinary care immediately. If your veterinarian is closed, go to the closest emergency clinic. This cannot wait even a few hours.

To help stabilize your dog's circulatory system, the veterinarian will administer large doses of IV fluids as well as other drugs including pain medication. Once this is done, an attempt may be made to pass a lubricated tube into the stomach to remove the food and gas. In some cases, a long needle may be placed through the skin and into the stomach which will at least allow the gas to escape.

Sometimes surgery is the only option. The stomach is emptied, rotated back into the correct position, evaluated for viability (along with the spleen) and sutured to the body wall so it cannot rotate again. If there is dead tissue in the stomach it will be removed. If the spleen is also damaged, it may have to be removed. Your dog can live without a spleen.

Older, male, large, deep-chested, dogs such as your standard poodle are the most susceptible to GDV. Dogs with nervous personalities seem to also be at greater risk. Other risk factors being studied include genetics, feeding from an elevated position, feeding only one meal per day, fast eaters, and being underweight.

It is possible to reduce the chance of a dog developing GDV with a prophylactic gastropexy. This is basically the same “tacking” procedure that is done to correct GDV, but performed electively, before a GDV event. This procedure makes it almost impossible for a dog to develop GDV. Although a dog with a gastropexy can get a “bloated” stomach, which may require limited veterinary care, the stomach cannot twist so the serious consequences are eliminated.

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