

What Is Vomiting?

- Vomiting is the forceful emptying of the stomach.
- If vomiting is prolonged, it can lead to dehydration.
- Vomiting can be associated with several medical conditions ranging from motion sickness to foreign body ingestion to cancer.
- Treatment is aimed at controlling the vomiting and resolving the primary cause.
- A safe environment, healthy diet, routine veterinary care, and wellness blood work will go a long way toward preventing vomiting.

Vomiting is defined as the forceful emptying of the stomach's contents. It is caused by a signal from the brain to the stomach that originates in a part of the brain known as the *vomiting center*. Vomiting initially developed because it helps save animals from poisoning. Nerves in the abdomen or certain substances in the bloodstream indicate to the brain that the animal may have eaten something toxic, and vomiting can help to rid the body of the toxic substance. Although this does occur now, the actual ingestion of toxins has become less of a threat to our pets than to their wild ancestors; over time, many more triggers began to induce the brain to signal vomiting. Prolonged vomiting can be dangerous because it can lead to life-threatening dehydration.

What Are the Causes of Vomiting?

Primary stomach or intestinal diseases that can cause vomiting include:

- Parasites
- Toxins
- Foreign bodies
- Spoiled food
- Food allergies
- Stomach ulcers
- Inflammatory bowel disease
- Cancer

Secondary or nonstomach disorders that can cause vomiting include:

- Motion sickness
- Thyroid disease (in cats)
- Pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas)
- Pyometra (uterine infection)
- Kidney or liver disease

- Canine parvovirus or distemper
- Feline panleukopenia virus

How Is the Cause of Vomiting Diagnosed?

Before attempting to diagnose what may be causing a pet to vomit, it is very important to differentiate between vomiting and regurgitation. Vomiting requires abdominal effort (constriction of the abdominal muscles) and is the active expelling of stomach contents. In contrast, regurgitation is the passive elimination of contents in the esophagus that happens without nausea or retching. This distinction is important because the medical conditions that tend to cause regurgitation are different from those associated with vomiting.

Once your pet's vomiting has been confirmed, your veterinarian will begin to approach your pet's diagnosis and treatment. In order to narrow the list of possible causes, your veterinarian will take into account your pet's age and species. For instance, a young energetic dog that is vomiting is more likely to have eaten something it shouldn't have, while a senior cat with weight loss, increased drinking, and vomiting is more likely to have a medical problem such as kidney disease or thyroid disease. Your veterinarian will likely ask detailed questions regarding duration of sickness, weight loss, medications, changes in appetite, and timing of the vomiting with regard to meals. A thorough physical exam will be performed to determine if there is abdominal pain, dehydration, or other abnormalities suggesting the cause of the vomiting. You may want to bring some of the vomit to the hospital because the appearance of the vomit can help with the diagnosis. For example, vomit with black coffee ground-like material indicates that the stomach may be bleeding.

Your veterinarian may also recommend performing laboratory tests on blood, feces, and urine. It may also be necessary to evaluate x-rays and perform an abdominal ultrasound examination. If your veterinarian suspects that the problem may be limited to the stomach and the intestines close to the stomach, an endoscopic examination may be recommended. This procedure requires anesthesia and involves passing an endoscope (a long tube containing a tiny video camera) down your pet's esophagus to look into the stomach and intestines.

How Is Vomiting Treated?

Dehydration from prolonged or severe vomiting is of immediate concern, and it may be necessary to admit your pet to the hospital for fluid replacement while a diagnosis is being pursued. Treatment is aimed at controlling the vomiting itself (to prevent further dehydration) and at gaining control of or eliminating the primary cause of the vomiting.

Some causes of vomiting are easily treated, such as when a pet with an allergy to a certain food stops vomiting when the diet is switched. On the other hand, a pet with stomach cancer may need surgery, chemotherapy, or more prolonged and aggressive treatment.

How Can I Prevent Vomiting?

Vomiting is a signal to the owner and the veterinary team that something is wrong. If your pet vomits once, remove food and water for a few hours. Continuing to eat and drink may cause the vomiting to continue instead of stopping after one episode. If your pet continues to vomit without

having anything to eat or drink, call your veterinarian. Also, do not allow your pet to eat grass—this is an old wives' tale and does not benefit the pet. In fact, eating grass can contribute to additional medical problems.

Sometimes it can be very difficult to determine the cause of vomiting. This is especially true if a pet is not well supervised or has access to a variety of things that can cause vomiting. Keeping a watchful eye on what your pet eats and preventing his or her access to harmful substances will help prevent many causes of vomiting. Having routine physical examinations, fecal testing, and wellness blood work performed regularly can permit the early discovery and treatment of medical conditions such as parasites, diabetes, kidney or liver disease, thyroid disease, and other conditions that can cause vomiting. A watchful eye, along with early diagnosis and treatment of primary disease, provide the opportunity to prevent vomiting in many cases.