



## **Pancreatitis in Dogs. Symptoms, Causes & Treatment**

Many years ago I was dog-sitting my sister's newfie as Jill had to attend a residential teachers training course. In the evening her dog Jasper became very listless, and I was concerned about him. At that very moment a lady, whom many of you will remember, Viv Pound, phoned to chat to Jill. I explained that she was away, but mentioned that Jasper did not seem well. Jasper was standing with his back hunched, obviously in pain, and being sick. I thought he might have a tummy upset that would eventually settle.

I described the symptoms, and she said that it was vital that I went to a vet immediately, because it sounded like pancreatitis. Pancreatitis in dogs is potentially life-threatening — so you must know the signs to look for. I rushed Jasper to the vets in Burton for an assessment. I was terrified to hear the vet say that Jasper may not survive the night. Jill naturally rushed back from the course, and there was a long worrying night ahead.

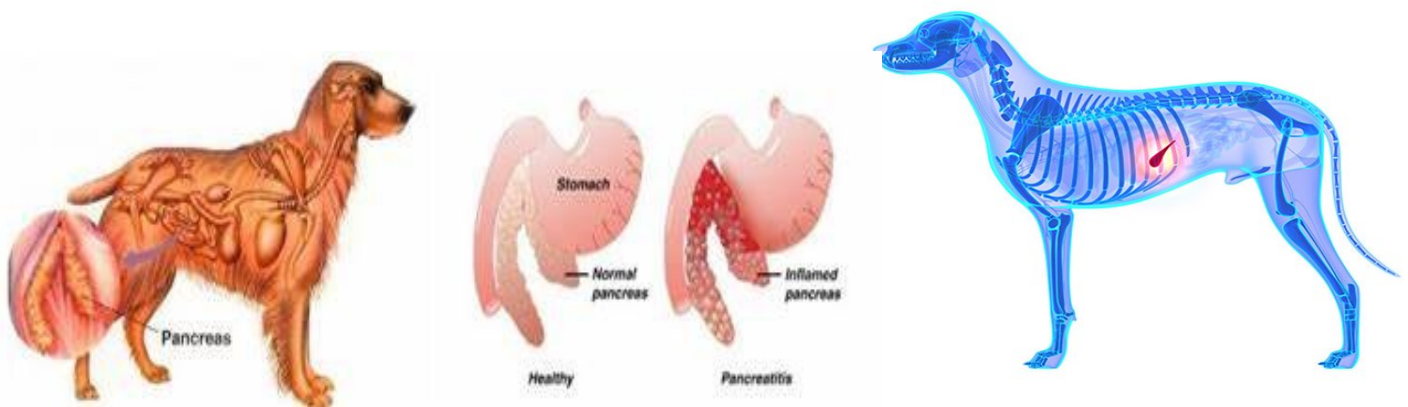
The vet palpated his abdomen, which was definitely tender, took his temperature, which was high at 103 degrees, and took bloods. Jasper received pain medication, antibiotics, and intravenous fluids to combat fluid loss, and came home in the morning with strict instructions not to eat that day. Eating anything — or even smelling food — could have caused his pancreas to secrete enzymes and trigger the destruction of healthy tissues and slow healing. He could lick ice cubes, and then drink a bit of water.

The day after he was allowed to eat about six tiny meals of low-fat, high-carbohydrate food. This meant rice, potatoes, or pasta. Overcooking these starchy foods makes them easier to digest. We would boil one cup of white rice (not instant rice) in four cups of water for 30 minutes to make a rice porridge mush. We gradually added in protein sources, such as skinless cooked chicken breast, low-fat cottage cheese, or well-cooked soft meat. When feeding a dog with pancreatitis, it's important to cook all the food even if you normally feed a raw diet. Because the dog's gut is compromised, it's necessary to remove fat and destroy bacteria.

After a week, Jasper progressed to a veterinary prescription diet for dogs with pancreatitis. He hated it. Many dogs with a history of acute pancreatitis must be on a special diet for the rest of their lives. If they don't like the pancreatitis diet, a low-fat weight loss diet often works just as well. Even if a high-fat meal didn't cause the initial bout, it can trigger a recurrence once the dog has had pancreatitis. After a month, Jasper was able gradually to go back to his old diet, minus the high-fat treats. Eventually, he even got his breakfast biscuits — but no more butter. He never had another bout of pancreatitis.

Pancreatitis in dogs is one of those conditions that owners must be informed about before it strikes, because the warning signs may not always be obvious at first. The symptoms might be mistaken for something less serious, and yet it is potentially life-threatening. The medical definition of pancreatitis is simple: “inflammation of the pancreas.” But like all serious conditions, there is more to it than that. Because it is dangerous, a suspected case of pancreatitis needs to be addressed by a vet as quickly as possible. No home treatments will work.

Before looking at the details of pancreatitis let us look at the small but vital organ itself: The pancreas lies in the very centre of the body, tucked under and surrounded by the lobes of the liver. The pancreas has many functions, but one is the release of enzymes that aid digestion. When the organ is working normally, the enzymes become active only when they reach the small intestine.



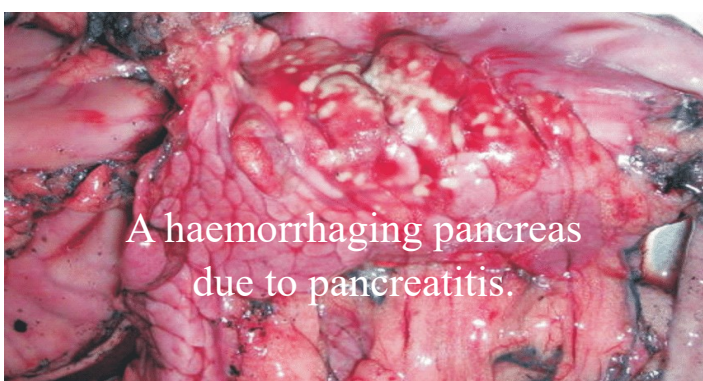
In a dog with pancreatitis, however, the enzymes activate when they’re released, inflaming and causing serious damage to the pancreas and its surrounding tissue and other organs. The enzymes can actually begin to digest the pancreas itself, which causes extreme pain to your dog and internal bleeding.

**What is Pancreatitis in Dogs?**

- ✓ Pancreatitis is defined as inflammation of the pancreas
- ✓ When functioning properly, pancreatic enzymes are activated as soon as they reach the small intestine
- ✓ Pancreatitis occurs when the digestive enzymes activate upon release, which causes inflammation and damage to the pancreas as well as surrounding tissue and organs

**Signs & Symptoms of Pancreatitis in Dogs**

- Poor appetite
- Anorexia
- Severe vomiting and diarrhea (sometimes bloody)
- Yellow, greasy stool
- Abdominal pain (dog is crying and hunching his back)
- Bloating
- Lethargy and weakness
- May have a fever
- Reluctance to walk



## Pancreatitis In Dogs

SYMPTOMS  
TREATMENTS  
AND  
CAUSES



**There are a number of causes and risk factors that can bring on pancreatitis,** although the attack often appears seemingly out of the blue. Among them are:

A high-fat diet. This is a major cause of pancreatitis, especially for a dog who gets one large helping of fatty food in one sitting.

A history of dietary indiscretion (a medical term for saying your dog will eat anything).  
Obesity.

Hypothyroidism (or other endocrine diseases).

Severe blunt trauma.

Diabetes mellitus.

Certain medications or other toxins. These include cholinesterase inhibitors, calcium, potassium bromide, phenobarbital, l-asparaginase, oestrogen, salicylates, azathioprine, thiazide diuretics, and vinca alkaloids.

In some cases there may be a genetic predisposition. Certain breeds or types of dogs have been associated with higher risks of pancreatitis, such as Miniature Schnauzers and some of the smaller toy and terrier breeds.

More about those fats: Human food is especially dangerous, though even high-fat dog food may cause pancreatitis. So owner vigilance is particularly required around holidays and other festive occasions.

Basically, if your dog is showing any signs of abdominal pain, the worst thing to do is feed him a fatty diet. This is one of many reasons that giving your dog table scraps, as tempting as it may be, is not advisable.

### **How does a vet diagnose pancreatitis in dogs?**

- Your dog's medical history
- Blood tests to measure pancreatic enzymes
- Physical examination including stomach, gums, heart, temperature
- Radiographs or ultrasound, to rule out other causes
- Fine needle aspiration of the pancreas

### **What's the difference between acute and chronic pancreatitis?**

#### **Acute Pancreatitis**

An acute attack of pancreatitis means it comes on suddenly, with no previous appearance of the condition. It can become life threatening to other organs if the inflammation spreads.

#### **Chronic Pancreatitis**

A chronic condition is one that has developed over time, slowly, and often without symptoms. This condition can result from repeated bouts of acute pancreatitis.

Both acute and chronic forms can be either severe or mild, and both result in pain.

## Types of Pancreatitis

Pancreatitis can range from acute to severe

### • Acute Pancreatitis •

- ✓ Symptoms include pain and a bloated or a distended abdomen
- ✓ Your dog may show difficulty in sitting down



### • Severe Pancreatitis •

- ✓ Your dog will experience more serious symptoms such as disseminated intravascular coagulation (DIC)
- ✓ DIC causes small hemorrhages and lethargy



## A Dog's Diet during Pancreatitis

Your vet may recommend withholding all food and water from your pet until symptoms subside



- ✓ During this period, monitor your pet's behavior closely



Once symptoms have lessened, switch your dog's food to a low-fat diet



In severe cases, your pet may need to be on an all-liquid diet

## Pancreatitis In Dogs

**The Pancreas** is an organ responsible for producing specific enzymes that promote digestion and enable dogs to absorb fats in food



**Pancreatitis** happens when there is inflammation and swelling of the pancreas

### Types of Pancreatitis



Acute is sudden with no previous signs



Chronic occurs over time

### Symptoms

#### Mild Pancreatitis



- Abdominal pain or swelling
- Discomfort lying down
- Dehydration
- Lack of appetite
- Hunched over back
- Vomiting & greasy diarrhea
- Fever

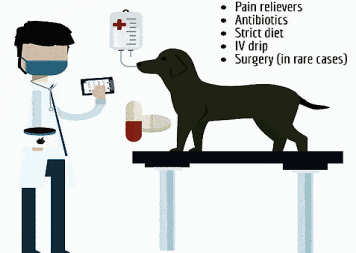
#### Severe Pancreatitis



- Hemorrhages
- Irregular heartbeat
- Difficulty breathing

### Treatment\*

\*Consult a vet to verify the condition and discuss options before starting any treatment



- Pain relievers
- Antibiotics
- Strict diet
- IV drip
- Surgery (in rare cases)

### Prevention

- Reduce food intake
- Low-fat diet
- Avoiding human food
- Multiple small meals



## Treatment and management of pancreatitis in dogs

There's no fancy treatment for acute pancreatitis. First and foremost, your dog's pain must be managed, and early intervention to prevent further complications is key. The most common treatment and management options are:

- Intravenous (IV) fluid therapy in severe Pancreatitis
- Vigorous monitoring of a worsening condition
- Antiemetic medication for vomiting (to prevent dehydration)
- Resting the pancreas (withholding food and water for 24 hours)
- Long-term management includes:
  - Vigilant monitoring of fat intake — No table scraps allowed!
  - Use of a prescription diet of gastrointestinal-supportive low-fat, or ultra-low fat, food.
  - Feed smaller, more frequent meals instead of one larger meal
  - Have amylase and lipase levels checked by a veterinarian regularly