

Bloat - knowing the signs could save your saint's life

The technical name is Gastric Dilatation-Volvulus (GDV) and it is prevalent in deep chested breeds, like the Saint Bernard. It is the second leading killer in dogs next to cancer. It is life threatening, comes on quickly, and requires *immediate* veterinary treatment, often emergency surgery, to save the dog. Call ahead and let them know you are bringing in a bloat case so they can be fully ready when you arrive.

What is it?

Bloating of the stomach is often related to swallowed air (although food and fluid can also be present). It usually happens when there's an abnormal accumulation of air, fluid, and/or foam in the stomach ("gastric dilatation"). Stress can be a contributing factor also. Bloat can occur with or without "volvulus" (twisting). As the stomach swells, it may rotate 90° to 360°, twisting between its fixed attachments at the esophagus (food tube) and at the duodenum (the upper intestine). The twisting stomach traps air, food, and water in the stomach. The bloated stomach obstructs veins in the abdomen, leading to low blood pressure, shock, and damage to internal organs. The combined effect can quickly kill a dog.

Symptoms:

If you even suspect your saint may be bloating - get to an emergency vet immediately

- Attempts to vomit (usually unsuccessful); may occur every 5-20 minutes
(One of the most common symptoms)
- Doesn't act like usual self
(Perhaps the earliest warning sign & may be the only sign that almost always occurs)
- Significant anxiety and restlessness
(One of the earliest warning signs and seems fairly typical)
- "Hunched up" or "roached up" appearance
(This seems to occur fairly frequently)
- Bloated abdomen that may feel tight (like a drum)
(Despite the term "bloat," many times this symptom never occurs or is not apparent)
- Pale or off-color gums
(Dark red in early stages, white or blue in later stages)
- Lack of normal gurgling and digestive sounds in the tummy
(Many dog owners report this after putting their ear to their dog's tummy)

Other signs:

- Gagging
- Heavy salivating or drooling
- Foamy mucous around the lips, or vomiting foamy mucous
- Whining
- Pacing
- Licking the air
- Seeking a hiding place
- Looking at their side or other evidence of abdominal pain or discomfort
- May refuse to lie down
- May attempt to eat small stones and twigs
- Drinking excessively
- Heavy or rapid panting
- Shallow breathing
- Cold mouth membranes
- Apparent weakness; unable to stand or has a spread-legged stance *Especially in advanced stage*
- Accelerated heartbeat *Heart rate increases as bloating progresses*
- Weak pulse
- Collapse

Can it be Prevented?

There is no way to fully prevent or predict GDV, although here is a list of suggestions shown helpful in some cases:

- Feed 2 or 3 smaller meals daily (as opposed to 1 large meal).
- Any changes in the diet should be made gradually, over a period of a week.
- Vigorous exercise, excitement and stress should be avoided from 1 hour before to 2 hours after meals.
- Excessive drinking should also be avoided.
- Avoid feeding food that are known to cause flatulence (gas), e.g. soy, beans, peas, onions, beet pulp, etc.
- Some veterinarians advocate the feeding of large pieces of fresh/raw fruits and vegetables (e.g. apples, oranges, carrots) 3 to 4 times a week for extra roughage.

Over-the-counter anti-flatulent (Simethicone products, such as Gas X®) should be given just before or dogs go through stressful situations. It may also be handy when the dog appears to have a lot of gas. Simethicone works by breaking down the surface tensions of the small air bubbles in the stomach, thus causing bigger bubbles to form, which theoretically, are easier for the stomach to pass.

On dogs known to be highly susceptible to GDV (e.g. ones that have already bloated before) discuss the use of medicinal prevention (such as Metoclopramide Hydrochloride, or Reglan®) with your veterinarian. The medicine is widely used in human after abdominal surgery to combat painful intestinal flatulence. It chemically decompresses the stomach and intestines, thus forcing the gas out. Like all drugs, there are side effects, so the benefits and problems of long term use should be carefully weighed and discussed with your veterinarian.

(None of this information is designed to be a substitute for veterinary care!)

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Spring Lake, NC