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GASTRIC DILATATION AND VOLVULUS (GDV, Bloat)

What is gastric dilation and volvulus (GDV)?

This occurs when the stomach fills with a large amount of gas (dilation). In severe cases, the dilation is accompanied by twisting of the stomach on itself (volvulus). When the stomach is twisted, the dog cannot remove the excess gas or liquid by burping. The stomach can become extremely distended causing a sudden and often very large swelling of the abdomen.

Why does it occur?

This problem mainly occurs in middle aged to older deep-chested dogs – which includes St Bernards, Rottweilers, German Shepherds, Dobermans, Great Danes, Alaskan Malamutes, Labrador Retrievers and Dachshunds. Some things that may increase the risk of a GDV occurring include feeding a large meal once daily, exercise around the time of feeding or an underlying gut motility (movement) problem.

What are the signs of GDV?

Signs of GDV usually include a sudden distension/swelling of the abdomen. This can be very noticeable in some cases. However sometimes the stomach twists while it is small so the dilation may not be obvious.

Dogs are often restless, pacing, vocalising or whimpering and unable to settle due to discomfort and pain in the early stages. Some dogs can look like they are choking on a bone or trying to cough something up and have excessive salivation. Sudden collapse and weakness can occur and if the condition is extremely severe it can cause sudden death.

Why is it a problem?

GDV results in severe problems in almost every system of the body:



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- Bloating of the stomach is painful and the pressure in the abdomen interferes with circulation of blood. Eventually this will result in severe shock and heart failure if not treated.
- The twisting of the stomach means it does not have adequate blood flow. This can cause the stomach to die and affect the organs that are next to the stomach.
- The twisting of the stomach may also cause twisting of other organs next to the stomach, especially the spleen.
- The distension of the stomach pushes on the diaphragm and the lungs and thus interferes with the ability to breathe adequately and the dog can develop very low oxygen levels (become hypoxic).
- Low blood oxygen levels and poor circulation mean the whole body is starved of oxygen. This can result in an irregular heart beat (heart arrhythmias) kidney failure, bleeding problems etc.

How do we treat GDV?

This condition needs to be treated by your veterinarian as quickly as possible. Initial treatment involves

1. Giving large amounts of intravenous fluids often very quickly.
2. Pain relief.
3. Release of as much of the built up gas within the stomach by a tube that is passed from the mouth to the stomach. Another method is to insert a large needle through the skin directly into the stomach.

Emergency surgery is then required to untwist the stomach and repositioned to its normal place in the abdomen. The stomach also needs to be checked to ensure that it is all healthy and that no dead tissue in the stomach itself needs to be removed and that there is a good blood flow to all areas of stomach. The stomach is then attached internally to the side of the abdomen (gastropexy). This procedure greatly reduces the likelihood of Recurrence.

We also check all the other organs around the stomach. If the spleen has also been badly affected it may need to be removed during surgery.



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What happens after surgery?

After surgery, the first 2 to 3 days are very important. This is the time when most complications occur. These can include abnormal heart rhythms which can be life threatening both at surgery and for several days afterwards. Dogs remain in the intensive care unit during this recovery period where we monitor for any complications, continue with their pain relief and intravenous fluids and encourage them to start eating again.

Most dogs are hospitalised for at least three days before they go home. We usually only discharge them once they are eating and drinking.

What happens when your dog is ready to go home?

Most dogs will go home on a short course of medication which may include drugs to help the gut start to move normally again or continued pain relief.

Your dog should be kept as quiet as possible and exercise restricted to toilet walks on a lead for the first 10 days.

For the first 7 days at home feed your dog small meals about 3 to 4 times a day of a bland, low fat diet that is easy to digest. Examples include boiled / steamed / microwaved skinless chicken, pasta, cooked veggies and rice. Gradually wean your dog back on to its regular diet after this time.

We advise that you feed your dog two smaller meals a day rather than one large one for the rest of its life. It is also advised that exercise should be avoided for the first hour after eating.