



UNDERSTANDING CONSTIPATION IN DOGS AND CATS

WHAT IS CONSTIPATION?

Constipation is the infrequent or difficult passage of faeces.

WHAT CAUSES CONSTIPATION?

There can be various causes for constipation. Dietary, behavioural, environmental and medically related causes may result in your pet becoming constipated.

Below are some of the more common causes of constipation:

Behavioural or environmental causes:

- Cats may become constipated if they refuse to use the litter tray due to it being soiled.
- Animals that are well house trained and are locked up all day, may become constipated as they will refuse to defaecate inside the house.
- Inactivity will often result in constipation; older animals that tend to sleep most of the day may be inclined to suffer from constipation.

Medically related causes:

- Pain in the rectal area may prevent your pet from defaecating.
- Inability to assume the position to defecate as seen in dogs and cats that have orthopedic problems e.g. spinal problems and fractures, as well as in animals that have neurological problems.
- Colonic obstructions that may be caused by tumours, granulomas, abscesses or enlarged prostate glands.
- A weakness of the colon.
- Megacolon is the enlargement of the colon. The colon becomes dilated and flaccid and is no longer able to contract properly, often leading to chronic constipation. These animals require constant veterinary care.



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Dietary causes:

- Abnormal diet, which includes too little fibre in your pet's diet or not drinking enough water.
- Feeding bones to your pet may cause an obstruction or severe constipation.
- Both long and short haired cats may ingest a considerable amount of fur while grooming, resulting in hairballs which could cause your cat to become constipated.
- Some animals are inclined to swallow foreign objects such as toys and plastic bags. This may cause an obstruction in your pet's bowel, resulting in either constipation or vomiting. This is very often a medical emergency.



HOW WILL I KNOW IF MY PET IS CONSTIPATED?

Signs of constipation may include the following:

- Intermittent straining with no production of faeces. Cats may be seen scratching around in their litter trays with intermittent straining; this sign should be distinguished from urinary tract infections which your vet will be able to determine on examination and further tests.
- Your pet may pass small amounts of hard, dry faecal matter or mucous after repeated attempts to defaecate.
- Defaecation may be painful and there may be redness and swelling around the anal area.
- Should the straining be severe enough, it may result in a prolapse of the rectum, which is a medical emergency.
- Anal scooting, which may also be a sign of blocked anal glands or worm infestation.
- Animals who are constipated will often show no interest in food and may even have intermittent vomiting.
- Weight loss (especially in animals that suffer with chronic constipation).
- Lethargy.

HOW IS CONSTIPATION TREATED?

Mild constipation can be treated with laxatives available from your veterinarian. It is however advisable to take your dog or cat to the vet for a thorough examination to ensure there are no other underlying conditions causing the constipation. Some diseases may be easily confused with constipation and will require a veterinary examination to rule these out.

Severe cases of constipation will require that your pet be placed on a drip and once fully rehydrated, enemas may need to be administered under veterinary supervision.

Depending on the severity of the constipation, your veterinarian may send your dog or cat home with a laxative and a special diet for a few days.

Reference: Nelson RW, Couto CG. Small animal internal medicine. 4th ed. St. Louis (MO): Mosby Elsevier; 2009. P. 366-7.



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