

## Dog Illnesses – A Veterinarian’s View

Some signs of disease in dogs, such as vomiting, diarrhea, coughing, limping or itching are pretty obvious to all pet owners. Others can be more vague. No one knows your dog better than you do, so if you notice subtle changes in your dog’s personality, appetite or energy levels, it’s worth a trip to your veterinarian to make sure all is well.

Personality changes may not be the same for every dog. A dog who is normally at your side all day may suddenly be more elusive, and a dog who is normally aloof may be more clingy. A Labrador who normally chows down every meal and suddenly refuses breakfast is a big deal, while skipping a meal probably wouldn’t be especially worrying for a dog who routinely picks at his food.

Other common signs of dog illnesses that are easily missed include increased water consumption or urination, unusual weight loss, panting, and restlessness at night. When in doubt about whether your dog is sick, err on the side of caution. It’s better to get a clean bill of health from the vet and breathe a sigh of relief, than to find out too late that a serious illness was brewing.

### Reaching a Veterinary Diagnosis

When you bring your dog to the vet for an illness, we will perform a full physical exam. Sometimes the problem is obvious, based on exam findings. However, there are many times the exam is normal or does not give the answers we need. This is especially true if the dog’s symptoms are non-specific or vague.

If a dog is limping, it’s pretty obvious we need to look at the affected leg, and if he is itching we need to look at his skin. But if he isn’t eating well or is just more lethargic than normal, it could be just about anything! Where do we start?

FIRST we consider your dog’s signalment. This is the age, sex and breed and it helps to narrow down the list of probably diagnoses. For example, if a puppy or young dog is vomiting, we first consider certain diseases such as Parvovirus, intestinal parasites, dietary issues or a foreign body intestinal obstruction. If the dog is older, we may be more likely to consider liver disease, kidney failure or cancer as possibilities.

The breed is also important as some breeds are more prone to certain canine illnesses than others. For example, German Shepherds are the poster children for pancreatic insufficiency. If they come to me for ongoing diarrhea and weight loss I would test for this disease early. If the dog was a Chihuahua, I would consider this disease less likely and not pursue the testing right away.

The next thing we'll do is get a good history. It's important that the person who knows the dog best is the one that brings him to the veterinary clinic. We want to know your dog's regular diet, if he's on any medications, if he got into anything he shouldn't have, if he's been around other dogs, his vaccination history, if he's had this problem before, and how long the symptoms have been happening. The answers to these questions may influence what diagnostic testing we recommend

Let's take vomiting, for example... if a young dog is vomiting very frequently for the last two days and has a history of eating socks, I would probably recommend x-rays to look for intestinal obstruction. If he's older and vomiting on and off for a few weeks, and gradually losing weight, I'd be more likely to recommend bloodwork to check his organ function. Of course, not every dog follows the rules, but these are good starting points.

After considering exam findings, signalment and history, we select the most reasonable diagnostic tests to recommend. If your dog is severely ill we may conduct multiple tests right away to get to the bottom of the problem as quickly as possible.

If the symptoms are more mild or chronic, we may start with one test and take things step by step. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we don't reach a definitive diagnosis. Tests can be normal or inconclusive, or they may be declined by pet owners due to cost or feasibility. In these cases we usually suggest supportive treatment. This may mean fluids, anti-nausea medications, or pain medications to help your dog feel better even though we aren't sure exactly what's going on. Sometimes this solves the problem. If it doesn't, we need to be more aggressive in our diagnostic testing.

## Dog Illness Prevention Tips

Lastly, there are things you can do as pet owners to prevent dog illnesses, or at least catch them early. The first is to keep up to date with [vaccinations](#). Rabies and Distemper/Hepatitis/Parvovirus vaccines are considered 'core' by the AAHA (the American Animal Hospital Association) and should be administered to all dogs. Puppies may need several boosters, while adult dogs can receive vaccines spaced out based on your veterinarian's recommendations or the laws in your state.

Leptospirosis and Bordatella (Kennel Cough) vaccination is also recommended by most veterinarians but may be based on your dog's lifestyle. Lyme disease is becoming more common as ticks are more widespread, and many vets are now recommending the Lyme vaccine based on your location. Canine influenza is another emerging disease and vaccines are recommended for at-risk dogs.

You can also prevent disease by administering regular heartworm prevention and yearly heartworm tests. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The current preventatives are very safe and heartworm treatment is complex, risky and expensive.

The same goes for flea and tick prevention. Keeping your dog free of [fleas and ticks](#) is much easier than battling a flea infestation or treating a tick-borne illness. Your dog will thank you for it.

Lastly keep up with regular physical exams at your vet's office. Remember that dogs age faster than humans and if they are examined less than 1 – 2 times per year we risk missing the warning signs that something is amiss. As dogs age, it is also recommended to check bloodwork regularly to monitor organ function.

There are some diseases which are simply not preventable, but by keeping up with regular health checks, we can at least catch things early and intervene before your dog becomes severely ill.

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