

Pancreatitis

What is a pancreas?

The Pancreas is an organ that lies near to the stomach and intestines and is responsible for making digestive enzymes. These are molecules which break down food in order to allow them to be absorbed. The pancreas also produces insulin, one of the hormones responsible for sugar balance in the blood.

What is pancreatitis?

Pancreatitis means inflammation of the pancreas where it becomes tender and swollen. When the pancreas is inflamed the digestive enzymes are activated in the pancreas prior to being released in the intestines and the activated enzymes damage the pancreas causing further damage. Sometimes the inflammation can be mild, causing only slight discomfort. However it can be very severe and in rare cases cause multi organ failure and in extreme cases, very rarely death.

What are the signs of pancreatitis?

The most common signs are lethargy, loss of appetite, restlessness, vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal pain. In some cases dogs will have such uncomfortable abdomens that they will adopt a 'praying' position. This means that they will have their front legs flat on the floor stretched out but stand up on their back ends like they are bowing. This posture helps take some of the pressure off their abdomen and can give them some relief.

What causes pancreatitis?

In most cases pancreatitis occurs for no apparent underlying reason. Most cases develop in middle to older age dogs that are overweight and certainly being overweight is a predisposing factor. Other factors can be certain medications, toxins, infections, having diabetes or Cushing's disease and other causes.

Diet is a big factor and often dogs will have a history of eating a fatty meal prior to the event (scavenging food). Some breeds are more likely to develop pancreatitis including cocker spaniels and terrier breeds.

Acute vs. Chronic Pancreatitis

Acute pancreatitis means sudden onset, usually severe pancreatitis. Chronic pancreatitis means ongoing problems with pancreatitis. Chronic pancreatitis may be undiagnosed and these dogs may just seem to have 'off' days and not eat for a day or two. Sometimes dogs that have a chronic grumbling pancreatitis will have an acute flare up. Equally dogs that have acute pancreatitis can develop chronic pancreatitis.

How is pancreatitis diagnosed?

Your vet is likely to be suspicious of pancreatitis on the basis of history, presenting signs and on clinical examination (painful abdomen, fever etc), but further tests will be required to fully support the diagnosis. Routine blood tests may show several abnormalities including a high white blood cell count, raised liver enzymes, high amylase and lipase and signs of dehydration. The diagnosis usually needs a specific blood test called a CPLi test which is a measurement that can be taken to monitor chronic pancreatitis. Very occasionally a diagnosis may be made by taking a biopsy of the pancreas during exploratory surgery, however this is not done routinely. When diagnosing causes of vomiting, other conditions may need to be ruled out, which may include x-rays, ultrasound scans and occasionally exploratory surgeries. Ultrasound scans can also reveal some potential complications associated with pancreatitis or searching for underlying conditions.

How is pancreatitis treated?

There is no specific cure for pancreatitis, fortunately though most dogs recover with appropriate supportive treatment. In mild cases patients can sometimes be managed with medication at home with gastroprotectants and anti-nausea medication. In more severe cases patients will need to be hospitalised to provide treatment and for monitoring, including intravenous fluid therapy, pain relief, medication to control nausea and vomiting and medication to stimulate the intestines to move.

Hospitalisation time varies, based on the case - anything from 24hrs to several days. Some of these patients are critically ill. Traditionally it was thought that those with pancreatitis should be starved for long periods of time, however it is now considered important to maintain nutrition. If they will eat on their own, a good quality, easily digestible and low fat diet is key. If they are completely inappetent for too long, we may have to place a feeding tube.

Ongoing management of pancreatitis

During and after treatment of pancreatitis, a low fat diet is advised to reduce risk of any further acute flare ups, especially if chronic pancreatitis is diagnosed. At Paragon we would usually recommend Royal Canin low fat gastro-intestinal prescription diet. Depending on the case we would usually recommend this diet is maintained for a minimum of 4-6 weeks after an acute incident and in severe or recurrent cases we would recommend this diet life long. We would definitely recommend that these cases **NEVER** have fatty foods or treats ever again as this could be enough to start off the pancreatitis again. Scavenging behaviour would have to be watched to prevent pancreatitis from flaring up.

Diabetes

Long term there is a risk that the pancreas could be so badly damaged that it is no longer able to produce insulin. This would result in a dog becoming diabetic. This is a rare problem but if your dog suddenly starts drinking more having had pancreatitis, then contact your vet.