

Constipation

By Sally Perea, DVM, MS, DACVN, Senior Nutritionist



Constipation is characterized by absent, infrequent, or difficult defecation associated with retention of feces within the colon and rectum (the last sections of the intestinal tract). Severe constipation can progress to obstipation when the feces become excessively hard and impacted within the colon. Megacolon refers to dilation and hypomotility (or decreased movement) of the colon, and is usually seen with severe constipation and may include abnormalities of the large intestine's muscle or neurologic function. Megacolon is a reported problem in cats, but is rarely seen in dogs.

Constipation can occur with any condition that impairs the movement of feces through the colon. When feces are retained within the colon for an extended period of time, water continues to be absorbed, resulting in progressively harder and drier feces. Constipation can occur secondary to an obstruction (such as an enlarged prostate, a pelvic fracture, a mass, or a diverticulum (an out pouching)), painful defecation (from anal wounds or orthopedic disorders such as hip problems), environmental factors (such as confinement/boarding or inactivity), medications (for example opioids and diuretics), neuromuscular dysfunction, fluid and electrolyte abnormalities, ingestion of foreign material, or inadequate water intake. Because of the potential for these underlying conditions, pets with constipation should be evaluated by a veterinarian.

Nutritional Factors Important For Addressing Constipation

Moisture

- Dogs or cats with constipation may be dehydrated. Hydration status should be corrected prior to initiating any dietary treatment. Free access to fresh water should be provided at all times. Water intake can also be enhanced by feeding canned foods or adding 2-3 parts water to 1 part dry kibble.

High Fiber

- Megacolon, obstruction, or partial obstruction of the colon should be ruled out prior to initiating a high fiber diet or fiber supplementation.
- Feeding a higher fiber diet or adding a fiber supplement will result in increased fecal volume and frequency of defecation.
- Fiber is classified as soluble or insoluble. Soluble fiber (such as pectins found in fruits or gums) has the ability to hold water, which helps to increase the moisture content of dry feces and normalize gastrointestinal transit time. Some soluble fibers are fermentable and support the growth of normal gastrointestinal flora and production of short chain fatty acids that provide energy to colonocytes (the cells of the colon) and stimulate longitudinal colonic smooth muscle contractions. Insoluble fiber (such as cellulose) has a reduced ability to hold water compared to soluble fiber and is not readily degraded by gastrointestinal bacteria. Insoluble fiber adds bulk to the feces which can help to stimulate colonic motility or movement. Many fiber ingredients (such as pea fiber) include a mixture of both soluble and insoluble fiber types.
- None of Natura's foods are very high in fiber. A fiber supplement can be added to the diet as directed by a pet's veterinarian.
- Transitioning to a higher fiber diet or adding a fiber supplement should be done slowly over four to five days to monitor response.

Highly Digestible

- For disease conditions associated with colonic obstruction or partial obstruction, feeding a high fiber, fecal bulking diet may be contraindicated. In these cases, feeding a highly digestible diet to decrease fecal mass is more appropriate.
- For cats with megacolon, feeding a highly digestible diet to decrease fecal mass is recommended.
- Many Natura foods are highly digestible and energy dense but one of the highest brands is EVO.
- Discuss dietary recommendations with your veterinarian prior to making any diet selections or changes.

If dietary therapy alone is not successful in preventing recurrence of constipation, oral laxative medications may be recommended by your veterinarian.

Other Considerations

- Confinement or lack of activity can contribute to constipation. Implementing a regular exercise routine or walking schedule may be helpful to pets that have constipation concerns.
- If a large fecal mass is present, enema treatment and/or manual extraction by a veterinarian may be required.

Monitoring

- Work closely with your veterinarian to monitor and adjust treatment as needed.
- Response to treatment can be monitored by recording daily bowel movements and fecal characteristics.
- Success of treatment is characterized by return of frequent bowel movements, absence of straining or pain on defecation, and normal fecal consistency.

With the right care and plan, many pets that suffer from constipation can enjoy an improved quality of life.