

Chronic/intermittent diarrhea in puppies

Differential list:

Viral (parvo, coronavirus, etc), bacterial (campylobacter, salmonella, clostridium, etc), parasites (coccidia, giardia), dietary indiscretion (puppy ate a food item that didn't agree with him/her, eg from the trash), dysbiosis (wrong ratio of bacteria in GI tract), foreign body (puppy ate a non food item), shock, anaphylaxis, dysautonomia (depending on location in the country), other.

This article is for adolescent pups (usually 3-12 months of age) with intermittent or chronic diarrhea >2 weeks, who otherwise eat, play, and act normally at home. Pups that don't fit that criteria need additional testing (see differential list above). There are a variety of additional differentials if an older animal (2 years? 6 years? 12 years?) rather than a puppy.

If no parasites and infectious bacterial causes like salmonella ruled out, then the top differentials are dysbiosis (basically, not enough good bacteria or not the correct ratio of bacteria) or sort of immune system related (I see retriever pups, usually Golden Retrievers, overrepresented and it seems to resolve with age).

Potential fixes:

1. Diet change - some pups don't do well on Proplan, for whatever reason. I haven't had problems with my own dogs, but in the clinic there are puppies that don't do great on Proplan but will do fine on Royal Canin Large Breed Puppy, or Royal Canin GI Puppy. Sometimes they only need to be on RC for the first year of life. Hills may also work. If a diet change seems expensive – realize you can buy a year (or more) of dog food for the cost of an exam, bloodwork, and abdominal ultrasound at a single veterinary visit.

If pups are on boutique brands (Zignature, Fromms, 4Health, Taste of the Wild, Acana, Canidae, etc) then this may also contribute to the diarrhea, in addition to having cardiac concerns (dilated cardiomyopathy).

2. Probiotics - whenever you use antibiotics, eg metronidazole, it kills off the good bacteria as well as the bad bacteria. There is a current fad in the veterinary world to not use metronidazole at all, which I feel is an extreme end of the spectrum and there are dogs that legitimately spend a week in a specialty clinic on IV fluids with a dozen diagnostic tests for \$10k, when 5 days of metronidazole at the beginning would have solved the problem and dog been normal. The opposite end of the spectrum is handing out metronidazole like candy for everything with loose poop. I try harder in puppies to avoid metro due to GI flora changes, but I also don't tolerate diarrhea in pups for very long due to risks of developing an intussusception, chronicity (the longer it goes on the harder it is to fix), weight loss, etc. I would absolutely treat puppies through the clinic who had diarrhea for a week even if acting and eating normally, and I would treat them until fecal consistency is normal, then use substantial amounts of probiotics.

Antibiotic use means you will need a lot of good bacteria to repopulate the GI tract. If you don't get enough in, then pups will develop diarrhea after coming off antibiotics. Puppies seem to be a lot more sensitive to antibiotic treatment than adult dogs, eg I don't always bother to give probiotics to adult dogs after a short course of metronidazole, but I always would for puppies.

The common probiotic options veterinarians reach for are Fortiflora (1 strain of bacteria, 1 billion units), Proviabio (7 strains, 5 billion units), and Visbiome (8 strains, 112 billion units). My preference for puppies that need a GI reset or for my adult dogs post whelping, is Visbiome, multiple times a day. I would go get a bottle (human or veterinary, seems to be the same thing just different label) and do two capsules 3-4 times a day for a week, then re-evaluate. You can't overdo probiotics.

3. Fiber - you can either buy psyllium powder and add to food, or can do a trial of Hills GI Biome food (\$\$). Either one will work better than pumpkin.

4. Vitamin B - often sold as Cobalequin. One capsule daily for 1-4 months. Many times dogs with diarrhea do not have enough vitamin B or an incorrect ratio of cobalamin/folate in their digestive tract, which is important for GI flora health. If a case of chronic diarrhea >4 weeks in an adult dog, we would do a minimum 16 weeks of 1) Cobalequin daily, or 2) injectable vitamin B weekly.

If the above changes don't work in 2-3 weeks, then other steps would be trying a sensitive skin and stomach food (eg Purina Proplan Sensitive Skin and Stomach), abdominal ultrasound, Texas A&M GI panel (cobalamin/folate levels), fecal PCR, maybe fungal testing due to location, etc. Honestly though, in retriever pups, this is almost always a problem with bacterial management. Make the GI flora happy, and the rest of the GI tract will be happy.

If the above recommendations don't work, then other discussions would be - it is small intestine diarrhea (large volume, infrequently) or large intestine diarrhea (small volume, frequently, straining), or both? is it just after exercise (sometimes I have to tell owners that if the third poop on a walk is runny but earlier was normal, then I really don't care about it) or is it all day long? is there blood in it (just streaks on the outside, or black tarry poop)? is there any vomiting? how well is the puppy eating, etc, to try to problem solve the case.

As noted initially at the beginning of the page, there are a variety of differentials and so when common treatments don't fix what appears to be a common problem – there may be something else going on.

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