



Pyometra

What is pyometra?

Pyometra is a common condition in female dogs that have not been spayed. It occurs when a bacterial infection develops inside the womb. The womb fills up with pus and can become very enlarged - up to 20 times its usual size. The infection makes the dog feel very unwell. If the pyometra is not treated promptly, bacteria and toxins can move into the bloodstream and cause blood poisoning.

Pyometra usually occurs in the first couple of months after a season. This is because the hormones that prepare the womb for possible pregnancy also make it much easier for bacteria to grow inside the womb. The risk of this happening increases as the dog gets older. If dogs are not spayed, they have a 25% chance of developing pyometra in their lifetime.

What are the symptoms of pyometra?

In the initial stages of pyometra, dogs may show:

- reduced appetite
- lethargy
- increased thirst

As time goes on, they may also show:

- vomiting
- diarrhoea
- collapse

Sometimes, the pus may leak out of the womb and a vaginal discharge may be seen. In other cases, the pus may remain trapped inside the womb and no discharge is seen.

How is pyometra diagnosed?

Pyometra is suspected in unspayed bitches showing the signs listed above. Affected dogs often have a high temperature as well.

An ultrasound scan is needed to look for enlargement of and pus within the womb. The ultrasound scan can also be used to check the other abdominal organs (stomach, intestines, spleen, liver and bladder) for other abnormalities that could be causing the symptoms.

A blood test will often show a high number of white blood cells in dogs that are suffering from pyometra. Your vet will also be able to see if the infection has caused any damage to the liver or kidneys.

How is pyometra treated?

Pyometra is treated by surgically removing the pus-filled womb and the ovaries that are producing the hormones. This is essentially the same surgery as performing a spay, only the operation is a little more challenging because the womb is so swollen and infected. In general, we would aim to remove the infected womb within 24 hours of making the diagnosis, as the dog cannot get better until the source of infection is removed.

Dogs with pyometra will also need intravenous fluids (a drip), antibiotics, pain relief and sometimes anti-sickness medication. If dogs are very poorly with blood poisoning, surgery may need to be delayed until they are more stable, however, this can be challenging as the dog can only improve so far without removal of the womb.

If pyometra is caught early and the womb is removed before the dog becomes too unwell, it is usual for dogs to go home 24 - 48 hours after surgery and to make a complete recovery within days.

If dogs have already begun to develop signs of blood poisoning, a longer period of hospitalisation with intravenous fluids, antibiotics and sometimes a feeding tube may be required.

In a very small number of cases, it is too late to reverse the blood poisoning signs and these dogs very sadly may not recover from pyometra.

Are there any alternatives to surgery?

Dog owners frequently ask if it is possible to treat pyometra without surgery. This is because dogs with pyometra are often middle aged or older, and the diagnosis and recommendation for surgery can come as a shock. We recommend that all dogs with pyometra are treated with surgery because this is the fastest and most reliable way of treating the condition. The benefits of the surgery vastly outweigh the risks of leaving the pus-filled womb in place.

If a client is very keen to treat pyometra without surgery, this can be discussed. It is possible to use a series of hormonal injections to encourage the womb to contract and push out the pus, whilst providing the dog with antibiotics and often intravenous fluids and pain relief. This option is rarely recommended because:

1. It takes around 48 hours to start working, so dogs remain unwell and in danger for longer.
2. It is not very successful - in many dogs the pyometra continues despite treatment; and in those dogs that do recover, 60% will develop a pyometra again at the next season.
3. The hormonal injections are expensive, and most dogs will eventually require surgery anyway so this can be a very costly way of managing the condition

4. The dog is likely to experience abdominal pain, restlessness, vomiting, diarrhoea and poor appetite as a result of the injections.

5. The hormonal injections are not licensed for this purpose (they are actually licensed to induce abortion after an accidental mating).

For these reasons, it is rare that your vet will recommend medical management of pyometra. It is usually reserved for pyometra in a young dog that an owner is very keen to breed from. In these cases, mating should be carried out at the next season, but owners must be aware that fertility is reduced by around 50% in these dogs and there remains a significant risk of another pyometra at the next or subsequent seasons.

How can pyometra be prevented?

Pyometra only occurs in dogs that have not been spayed. Therefore, we recommend that dogs not intended for breeding are spayed. Spaying also avoids unwanted pregnancy and, if carried out early in life, reduces the risk of developing mammary cancer.

If bitches are not spayed, owners should be vigilant about monitoring their dogs for signs of ill health, particularly in the two months after a season, and should seek veterinary attention sooner rather than later if any problems are noted. Sometimes the first sign of a problem can be a season that seems to last for longer than usual, or keeps stopping and starting.

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