

Hemorrhagic Gastroenteritis in Dogs

Hemorrhagic gastroenteritis (HGE) is a fairly common disorder of dogs that is characterized by the sudden development of vomiting and/or diarrhea. The vomitus and the diarrhea may contain variable amounts of bright, red blood or dark, digested blood.

Contributing Factors

There are no known contributing factors. Most dogs appear healthy prior to the onset of clinical signs.

Prevalence

Any breed may be affected but certain breeds are more often involved. Usually, the dog is a young to middle-aged small breed, such as the miniature Poodle, miniature Schnauzer, Dachshund, and Yorkshire terrier.

Causes/Transmission

The exact cause of HGE remains unknown.

Clinical Signs

There is some variability in the both the severity and course of this disease but, generally, signs are very sudden in onset. Vomiting is followed by the onset of bloody diarrhea. The rapid onset of profound dehydration is one of the hallmarks of HGE. The continuing loss of bodily fluids can progress so rapidly that hypotension (low blood pressure) and shock develop. Fever is not a characteristic finding.

Diagnosis

The diagnosis of HGE is often one of exclusion, meaning other possible causes of bloody vomitus and/or bloody diarrhea must first be considered. Some of these possible causes include ulcers, trauma, gastrointestinal tumors or obstruction, foreign bodies, infectious diseases, and coagulation (clotting) disorders. Evaluation of these other causes might require such tests as a complete blood count, biochemical analysis of the blood, x-rays, and fecal evaluation.

The blood count of affected dogs is characterized by an extremely high hematocrit (red blood cell count). Most normal dogs have a hematocrit of 35-55%, while dogs with HGE may have hematocrits well above 60%. The elevated hematocrit provides the veterinarian with an important diagnostic clue that the dog may have HGE.

Treatment

Dogs with HGE will appear profoundly ill and, if left untreated, may die. In most cases, the disorder appears to run its course in a few days if the animal is given appropriate supportive care. Intravenous therapy given at the veterinary hospital provides the cornerstone of therapy for HGE. Fluids given under the skin (subcutaneous fluids) are generally not considered adequate to meet the significant fluid requirements of most dogs with HGE.

If intravenous fluid therapy is not given, the dog's red blood count will continue to elevate. Eventually, the blood may become so thick that it flows very slowly through the blood vessels. In this situation, the dog is at risk for a potentially fatal clotting disorder called DIC. Once DIC has begun, it is often irreversible and often leads to death of the animal.

Additional therapy may include antibiotics and anti-ulcer medication.

Prognosis

The prognosis is usually good for complete recovery. A small number of dogs will have a later recurrence of the disorder.

Transmission to Humans

Canine HGE poses no known health risk to humans.

Prevention

Because the cause is unknown, there is no recommended preventive therapy.