

mutt smart...

## BLOAT IN DOGS



### NEED TO KNOW

Michael Franco

Porter was a healthy, energetic three-year-old Standard Poodle who spent his days romping around the grounds of an eco-resort in the Caribbean. On one typically sunny day in March, he whiled away his hours chasing geckos, greeting guests, dipping his paws in the pool and playing ball with me, his owner. The next morning, by 11am, he was dead.

During the night, he had fallen prey to a condition known as *bloat* or *gastric torsion* in which his stomach filled with gas and then twisted in such a way that the pressure couldn't be relieved. Even though my wife and I got him to a vet as soon as we could, there was nothing to be done to save his young life.

Gastric dilatation-volvulus (GDV) as it is known by its more proper medical term, is the single biggest killer of canines after cancer, claiming approximately 20,000 large-breed dogs like Porter each year. Species with deep-chest side profiles like Great Danes, Weimaraners, Saint Bernards, Gordon and Irish Setters, Bernese Mountain Dogs and Standard Poodles are particularly prone to the devastating condition. Purebreds are three times likely to succumb to bloat as

mixed breeds, males are twice as susceptible as females, and older animals are more likely to get the condition than younger dogs, with a 20% increase in risk per year.

Even though bloat is a quick and dreadful killer, there are some things you can do to help you best friend stay out of its path. Here's a brief primer on what you can do to limit and if necessary, identify and treat the condition:

## **Preventing Bloat**

Gastric torsion basically consists of two steps. In the first, the dog's stomach fills with gas. This, in and of itself is not the dangerous part. However, the condition becomes critical when the stomach twists, even just a little, and prevents the dog from expelling the gas either through its mouth or rear. When this happens, the blood supply to the spleen can be cut off, blood flow to the heart decreases, and the stomach begins to accumulate toxins. The dog can sometime slip into shock as it suffers from falling blood pressure.

Here are some things you can do to keep things from ever getting so critical:

- Feed your dog two to three smaller meals a day rather than just one large one.
- Do not allow your dog to play or exercise vigorously immediately before or for at least two hours after a meal.
- Try to keep your dog from gulping its food and water – especially after activity.
- If you find that your dog is prone to gas, try adding a digestive enzyme to his or her food.
- Although once thought a beneficial practice, it is now agreed that elevating your dog's food and water bowls is a major contributing factor to bloat.
- Feed your dog a diet that is primarily protein – not grain – and lists meat and fats within the first few ingredients. Some theorize that grain can ferment in your dog's intestine and lead to gas.

- Always keep a product containing simethicone on hand such as Mylanta Gas or Gas-X. These preparations are available over-the-counter and can help reduce the swelling in your dog's belly if it begins to bloat.
- It is widely believed that genetics can play a role in bloat, so it is important to know if any of your dog's relatives suffered from the condition. If so, be extra vigilant in his or her care.

Finally, if you have a large breed, deep-chested dog that has had bloat and survived, or if she has the condition in her lineage, you might want to consider Gastropexy surgery. In this minimally-invasive operation, the right side of the stomach is stitched to the right side of the body wall to prevent future twists. Obviously, all surgery has risks so if you are considering such a step, it should be carefully discussed with your veterinarian first.

### **Identifying Bloat**

Every dog reacts to bloat differently, however, there are some universal warning signs you can watch out for. Primary amongst these is non-productive vomiting or "dry-heaving." Your dog may indicate the need to go outside at an unusual hour and once outside may try to vomit or defecate but not have any success.

An equally obvious sign of bloat is severe swelling of the belly area, although this symptom does not always become immediately apparent to the touch. If, however, the stomach is hard to the touch, like an over-inflated ball, and makes a hollow sound when tapped, bloat is a certainty.

Additionally, a dog just entering the early stages of bloat may move in an unusual manner as it tries to clear his discomfort, sometimes assuming a wide-legged stance. He may also exhibit generally restless behaviour: moving from one place to another, refusing to lie down for more than a few seconds, pacing, panting, seeking a hiding place, exhibiting rapid breathing and/or drooling. The gums may also change colour from a deep red in the early stages to blue or white as the affliction progresses.

## Treating Bloat

If you suspect bloat in your dog, the biggest favour you can do is rush him to the vet immediately. This can not be emphasized enough. Do not wait and see if the discomfort passes, do not think about letting your dog “sleep it off,” do not stall at all. In this condition, time is critically, urgently, direly of the essence. Be sure to call your vet in advance and alert the staff that you a bringing in a dog suffering from bloat so that they can prepare the facility for the steps they will need to take to save your dog’s life. When you arrive at the vet, do not wait in line. Get someone’s attention immediately and tell them your situation.

Once in surgery, your vet will untwist the stomach (as well as the pancreas if it has become involved) and remove any dead tissue that has accumulated in the stomach lining. Unfortunately, even if a bloated dog makes it through the surgery, his danger may not be resolved. Many dogs die a few days after the procedure due to something known as *reperfusion* which is caused by the release of toxins that accumulated in the stomach and spleen while they were twisted. For this reason, prevention, identification and immediate action are exceedingly critical.

Oddly, even though bloat claims the lives of more dogs than every other condition except cancer, many people have never heard of it. By educating yourself and spreading the word about this ravaging condition, there’s a chance to move the condition much further down the already-too-long list of threats to man’s best friend.