

## 10 Signs That Shout 'Get Me to the Vet Now'

If you observe any of these red flag warnings in your dog, don't delay. Depending on their severity and suddenness, these symptoms could signal a condition that could kill your pet within just hours or days.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- When your canine companion isn't feeling well, it can be difficult to decide whether to wait it out for a day or two, or call your veterinarian
- This decision can be especially difficult when the symptoms you're noting can signal both a mild, transient illness, as well as a life-threatening emergency
- There are several symptoms you should never disregard if you see them in your dog, because a wait-and-see approach is just not worth the risk
- If your dog has sudden undiagnosed breathing problems, he should see a veterinarian immediately
- Lethargy or exhaustion is a nonspecific symptom that can signal a number of potential underlying disorders, including some that are serious or even life-threatening

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While your dog can't tell you when she's not feeling well, most devoted pet parents tend to develop a sixth sense about such things. But even when you become aware that something seems a little out of whack with a furry family member, it can be difficult to know whether it's best to keep an eye on her for a day or so or whether you should make an urgent appointment with your veterinarian.

The puzzle is even more challenging when your dog's symptoms commonly occur in disorders at both ends of the spectrum — those that signal something benign as well as something life-threatening. To clarify things a bit, the following symptoms fall into the category of red flags. They may or may not indicate a serious problem with your dog's health, but they should be investigated right away by your veterinarian or an emergency animal clinic.

### 10 Red Flag Symptoms in Dogs

1. **Difficulty breathing** — A dog in respiratory distress will have labored breathing or shortness of breath that can occur when he breathes in or out. Breathing difficulties can mean that not enough oxygen is reaching his tissues. Additionally, pets with heart disease may not be able to pump enough blood to their muscles and other tissues.

Respiratory distress often goes hand-in-hand with a buildup of fluid in the lungs or chest cavity that leads to

shortness of breath and coughing. If your dog has sudden undiagnosed breathing problems, he should see a veterinarian immediately.

2. **Coughing** — Coughing in dogs, unless it's a one-and-done situation, generally indicates an underlying problem. Examples include a possible windpipe obstruction, kennel cough, asthma, bronchitis, pneumonia, heartworm disease, heart failure and tumors of the lung. All causes of coughing require investigation, and in most cases, treatment.
3. **Fever** — If your pet's temperature spikes, it usually means his body is fighting an infection. The normal body temperature for most dogs is 100.5 to 102.5 degrees F. If your dog feels warm to you and her temp is higher than normal, make an appointment with your veterinarian.
4. **Lethargy or extreme fatigue** — A lethargic pet will appear drowsy, sluggish and/or indifferent. He may be slow to respond to sights, sounds and other stimuli in the environment. Lethargy or exhaustion is a nonspecific symptom that can signal a number of potential underlying disorders, including some that are serious or even life-threatening. If your dog is lethargic for longer than 24 hours, it's time to make an appointment with your veterinarian.
5. **Trouble urinating** — This includes discomfort while urinating, straining to urinate and frequent attempts to urinate with little success. If your dog cries out while relieving herself, seems preoccupied with that area of her body or is excessively licking the area, you should make an appointment with your veterinarian right away. There are several underlying causes of urinary difficulties, some of which can result in death within just a few days.
6. **Bloody diarrhea, urine or vomit** — Digested blood in your dog's poop will result in black tarry stools. Fresh blood in the stool indicates bleeding in the colon or rectum. Either situation is cause for concern and should be investigated as soon as possible.

Blood in the urine, called hematuria, can be obvious or microscopic. There are a number of serious disorders that can cause bloody urine, including a blockage in the urinary tract, a bacterial infection and even cancer. Vomited blood can be either bright red (fresh) or resemble coffee grounds (indicating partially digested blood). There are a variety of reasons your dog might vomit blood, some of which are relatively minor, but others are serious and even life threatening.

7. **Loss of appetite and/or weight loss** — Often, loss of appetite is the very first sign of an underlying illness in pets. There can be many reasons your dog isn't hungry or refuses to eat, but not eating can begin to negatively impact his health within 24 hours. And for puppies 6 months or younger, the issue is even more serious.

Weight loss is the result of a negative caloric balance, and it can be the consequence of anorexia (loss of appetite) or when an animal's body uses or eliminates essential dietary nutrients faster than they are replenished. Weight loss exceeding 10% of your dog's normal body weight will be a red flag for your vet. There can be several underlying causes, some of which are very serious.

8. **Pacing, restlessness or unproductive retching** — When a dog paces and seems unable or unwilling to settle down, it can signal that she's in pain, discomfort or distress. One very serious condition in dogs in which these symptoms are common is gastric dilatation volvulus (GDV), also called bloat. Bloat is a life-threatening condition that most often occurs in large breed dogs and those with deep chests.
9. **Red eye(s)** — If the white area of your dog's eye turns bright red, it's a sign of inflammation or infection that signals one of several diseases involving the external eyelids, the third eyelid, the conjunctiva, cornea or sclera of the eye. Redness can also point to inflammation of structures inside the eye, eye socket disorders and also

glaucoma. Certain disorders of the eye can lead to blindness, so any significant change in the appearance of your pet's eyes should be investigated.

10. **Fainting, collapsing** — When an animal collapses, it means he has suffered a sudden loss of strength that causes him to fall and be unable to get back up. If a collapsed pet also loses consciousness, he has fainted. Either of these situations is an emergency, even if your dog recovers quickly and seems normal again within seconds or minutes of the collapse.

All the reasons for fainting or collapsing are serious and require an immediate visit to your veterinarian. They include a potential problem with the nervous system (brain, spinal cord or nerves), the musculoskeletal system (bones, joints or muscles), the circulatory system (heart, blood vessels or blood) or the respiratory system (mouth, nose, throat or lungs).

Some symptoms of illness in dogs are best handled by simply giving them a chance to run their course, for example, a temporary gastrointestinal (GI) upset resulting from indiscriminate snacking, which usually resolves in a day. Other symptoms can be so sudden, severe and frightening that you know immediately you need to get your pet to the vet or an emergency animal hospital.

The 10 symptoms listed above can fall somewhere in the middle, so these will provide you with some solid guidance in the event your four-legged family member develops symptoms that point to a severe or life-threatening illness.

## Sources and References

[MedicineNet \(Archived\)](#)

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