

Managing Megaesophagus in Dogs

Dogs being fed upright in high chairs. While it may seem like an odd trend to the untrained eye, parents of dogs with megaesophagus know this scene isn't just staged for social media — it's an everyday necessity.

Certain breeds are born with this condition, which makes it difficult for them to digest food unless they eat in an upright position. Managing megaesophagus in dogs can be achieved through a special diet and, in some rare cases, surgery.

What Is Megaesophagus in Dogs?

Normally when a dog swallows, a muscular tube called the esophagus moves the food from their mouth to their stomach to be digested. In megaesophagus, dogs are unable to swallow food normally because their esophagus lacks the muscular tone and motility needed to move food and water. Instead, their esophagus dilates and food backs up, causing them to regurgitate the meal.

This condition is the most common cause of regurgitation in dogs. It's a congenital condition, meaning some dogs are born with it. Megaesophagus is a heritable disease in miniature schnauzers and wire-haired fox terriers, Newfoundlands, German shepherds, Great Danes, Labrador retrievers, Irish setters, shar-peis and greyhounds are also predisposed.



This condition can also be acquired secondary to another disease, like neurological or hormonal disorders, as well as trauma to the nervous system, blockage in the esophagus, severe esophageal inflammation or exposure to toxins.

In many cases, unfortunately, the cause is never determined.

What Are the Signs of Megaesophagus in Dogs?

The main indicator of megaesophagus in dogs is regurgitation fairly soon after eating. One thing to note is that regurgitation looks different from vomiting. Vomiting usually involves audible retching where the contents that come back up originate in the stomach or small intestines. With regurgitation, food, water and saliva come back up without retching and originates within the esophagus, usually without warning.

Other signs may include weight loss despite a voracious appetite, poor growth in puppies, excessive drooling or bad breath. Dogs with megaesophagus are at risk for aspirating regurgitated food into their lungs and developing aspiration pneumonia. Signs of aspiration pneumonia include cough, nasal discharge, fever, poor appetite and lethargy.

If your dog is experiencing any of these signs, consider making an appointment with your veterinarian for further evaluation as soon as possible.

How Is Megaesophagus in Dogs Diagnosed?

Both megaesophagus and aspiration pneumonia are usually seen on a chest X-ray. There are no specific blood tests for megaesophagus; however, your vet may want to run additional tests to determine if the condition is secondary to another disorder. This may require an esophageal endoscopy.

Endoscopy is where a camera on the end of a tube is passed down the esophagus to look for abnormalities. Endoscopy is a useful procedure in cases of esophageal stricture, tumors or foreign bodies. This procedure will require dogs to go under anesthesia, but generally, your dog will be able to return home after the procedure.

If the underlying cause can be treated & intervention is early enough, the esophagus may regain motility and megaesophagus may regress. In many cases, however, megaesophagus is a lifelong condition that must be managed.

Managing Megaesophagus in Dogs

Preventing aspiration and allowing food to travel to the stomach is key in the management of megaesophagus in dogs. Dogs with this condition are often underweight and may require a high-calorie diet, which can be best satisfied with wet or canned food.

When these soft foods are hand-rolled into bite-sized meatballs, they can stimulate a dog's esophagus to contract and move solids. A therapeutic diet may be a good choice for dogs with megaesophagus; talk to your veterinarian to see if one might be right for your dog.

Dogs should be fed in an upright position, about 45 to 90 degrees to the floor, which is where high chairs come in handy. The Bailey chair is designed specifically for dogs who have megaesophagus, supporting them in the upright position for feeding. If your dog is only mildly affected, you may not need to invest in a special chair; however, food bowls must be elevated enough from the floor so that the dog does not have to bend down at all to eat.

Some dogs may be so severely affected that they cannot keep anything down. In these cases, a permanent stomach tube can be inserted by a vet to bypass the esophagus entirely. Stomach tubes are well-tolerated and generally easy to maintain.

It is very important to monitor dogs with megaesophagus daily for any signs of life-threatening aspiration pneumonia, such as difficulty breathing, fever and rapid heart rate. Aspiration pneumonia and malnutrition are the leading causes of death in dogs with megaesophagus. If your dog has this condition, be sure to check their weight every week and monitor for signs of aspiration pneumonia daily.

While megaesophagus can present some challenges, it doesn't have to interfere with your pet's quality of life. With appropriate management and monitoring, in conjunction with a strong partnership with your local vet, many dogs with megaesophagus can have a relatively normal life.

Contributor Bio

Dr. Sarah Wooten

Dr. Sarah Wooten graduated from UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine in 2002. A member of the American Society of Veterinary Journalists, Dr. Wooten divides her professional time between small animal practice in Greeley, Colorado, public speaking on associate issues, leadership, and client communication, and writing. She enjoys camping with her family, skiing, SCUBA, and participating in triathlons.

Tips for Feeding Dogs with Megaesophagus

In the past, a diagnosis of megaesophagus was usually a death sentence. Severe cases of the condition make it virtually impossible for a dog to hold down food and water. In health, the esophagus is a muscular tube that pushes what is swallowed into the stomach. A "megaesophagus" is like a deflated balloon. It passively collects food and water until it can take no more, at which point the dog regurgitates all that he has just swallowed.

Megaesophagus can be a symptom of another disease (anatomical abnormalities, neuromuscular disorders, etc.), and in these cases, addressing the primary problem may also result in less regurgitation. Unfortunately though, most cases of megaesophagus are idiopathic, meaning that no underlying cause can be found. When a dog has permanent megaesophagus, whatever the reason, feeding management is the most important part of treatment.

The goal of feeding management is to get food and water out of the esophagus and into the stomach as quickly as possible. This is important for several reasons:

- Dogs obviously need to digest and absorb food and water to survive.
- Once food and water is in the stomach, it cannot be regurgitated. (Vomiting is still possible but not likely with megaesophagus.)
- Repeated episodes of regurgitation puts dogs at high risk for aspiration pneumonia.

As we have gained more experience with megaesophagus, we have been able to develop guidelines that work for many dogs:

- Feed multiple, small meals throughout the day.

- Feed a high quality, calorically dense food to limit the volume necessary to meet the dog's nutritional needs.
- Prevent the dog from having access to food and water outside of monitored feeding times (e.g., on walks or by raiding housemate's bowls).
- Feed the dog in an elevated position. Dogs with mild megaesophagus may be able eat from a raised food bowl, ideally either seated or with their front feet on a block of some sort to increase the angle of their esophagus. In most cases, however, dogs with megaesophagus need to eat in a truly vertical position and remain upright for 20-30 minutes after a meal. This is best accomplished by training dogs to use a Bailey chair.
- When all else fails, a permanent feeding tube can be inserted into the dog's stomach through which owners can administer food and water.

Exactly what to feed is still a matter of trial and error. Each patient seems to have an ideal food consistency, but this can vary greatly between individuals. Options to try include meatballs of canned or homemade dog food, a thin slurry of food and water, a thicker gruel, and thoroughly soaked kibble. When dogs are unable to keep down enough liquid to meet their needs, they can be supplemented with gelatin squares (often called "Knox blocks") or subcutaneous fluids.

There's no doubt that taking care of a dog with megaesophagus requires a truly dedicated owner, but if you fall into that category, the disease no longer has to be a death sentence.



Dr. Jennifer Coates

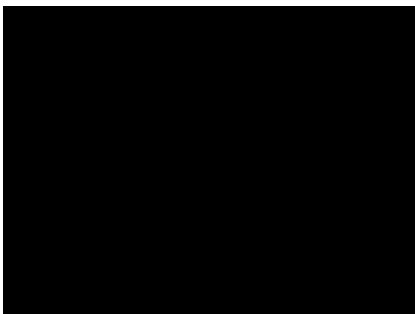
Image: Jaromir Chalabala / Shutterstock

Food For Dogs With Megaesophagus - Food Keg

Megaesophagus is a condition in which the esophagus doesn't work correctly. Food can get stuck and will not pass into the stomach easily. Because of this, dogs with this condition often regurgitate their food or water during or soon after eating. Many times owners will find their dog lying on its side and shaking as if it is cold. The shaking motion is actually part of the disease process and nothing to worry about. Buddy's Breathless – Megaesophagus is formulated to improve digestion and stop pet regurgitation.

Megaesophagus is a condition in which the esophagus becomes enlarged or dilated; food cannot pass normally down the esophagus. This condition makes it difficult for dogs to swallow and digest food. Megaesophagus may also be associated with diseases such as diabetes, kidney failure or Cushing disease.

Megaesophagus is a disease in which the esophagus becomes enlarged and floppy. The esophagus is responsible for moving food from your dog's mouth to her stomach, and without it, food can become stuck. To help our dogs with megaesophagus, we created a special formula that naturally stimulates appetite, softens stool, improves digestion and reduces regurgitation.



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still possible but not likely with megaesophagus.) Repeated episodes of regurgitation puts dogs at high risk for aspiration pneumonia. As we have gained more experience with megaesophagus, we have been able to develop guidelines that work for many dogs:

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What kind of Conditions Cause Megaesophagus?

It depends on if we are talking about congenital megaesophagus (born with it) or an acquired megaesophagus that is usually developed during adulthood.

Congenital Megaesophagus Most cases involve young puppies; Great Danes, Irish setters, Newfoundlands, German Shepherds, Shar pei, and Labrador retrievers are genetically predisposed. In these cases the condition is believed congenital though it often does not show up until the pup begins to try solid food. Congenital megaesophagus is believed to occur due to incomplete nerve development in the esophagus. The good news is that nerve development may improve as the pet matures. Prognosis is thus better for congenital megaesophagus than it is for megaesophagus acquired during adulthood with recovery rates of 20-46 percent reported in different studies. Most puppies are diagnosed by age 12 weeks though mild cases may not be clearly abnormal until closer to age one year.

A similar congenital problem is the vascular ring anomaly. This is a band of tissue encircling and constricting the esophagus. Such tissue bands are remnants of fetal blood vessels, which are supposed to disappear before birth. They do not always do so. Improvement is obtained when the band is surgically cut but in 60 percent of cases some residual regurgitation persists.

Acquired Megaesophagus Since the regurgitation involved in megaesophagus is challenging to manage, every effort should be made to minimize it. If the megaesophagus is secondary to another disease, then there is potential to treat that other disease and greatly improve or even resolve the megaesophagus. Many conditions have been associated with the development of megaesophagus so it is worth screening for the treatable ones.

Myasthenia gravis Myasthenia gravis is considered the most common cause of canine megaesophagus and is the first condition to rule out. Myasthenia gravis is a condition whereby the nerve/muscle junction is destroyed immunologically. Signals from the nervous system sent to coordinate esophageal muscle contractions simply cannot be received by the muscle. Megaesophagus is one of its classical signs though general skeletal muscle weakness is frequently associated. This condition is treatable and often resolvable but special testing is needed to confirm it. Approximately 25% of dogs with acquired megaesophagus have myasthenia gravis.

Stricture Scarring in the esophagus (as would occur after a foreign body episode or with damage to the esophagus from protracted vomiting) may be sufficient to interrupt neurologic transmissions or even narrow the esophagus so that food cannot pass through it. (Such a narrowing is called a "stricture.") Technically, this is not a true megaesophagus as the muscles are working normally; there is simply an obstruction present. Special balloons can be inserted in the esophagus to dilate the narrowed area but some residual regurgitation is likely to persist. Tumors of the esophagus may have similar effects in that they, too, can cause obstruction.

Hypoadrenocorticism (Addison's disease) Addison's disease (hypoadrenocorticism) has also been associated with megaesophagus. This condition represents a deficiency of cortisone production by the adrenal gland. This deficiency alters the metabolism of esophageal muscle. Diagnosis and treatment are not difficult and, in this situation, the megaesophagus can frequently be resolved if not greatly improved with treatment.

Esophageal Obstruction External obstruction of the esophagus could cause a similar syndrome by creating a blockage. A mass in the chest could pinch the esophagus closed. Depending on the situation, the obstruction could be relieved greatly, improving the regurgitation potential.

Dysautonomia A condition once rare in the U.S. is also worth mentioning and that is dysautonomia. Dysautonomia patients have a 60% incidence of megaesophagus and usually affects dogs living in rural areas. The syndrome involves a total disruption of the entire autonomic nervous system leading to difficulty urinating, dilated pupils, flaccid colon (megacolon), flaccid anal tone, poor tear production and, of course, megaesophagus. Successful treatment is unlikely so it is helpful to recognize this constellation of signs from the beginning so that euthanasia can be considered. Testing for Dysautonomia involves stimulating the autonomic nervous system with drugs and checking for response (increased heart rate in response to atropine injection, pupil constriction in response to pilocarpine eye drops etc.) or lack thereof.

All these conditions must be sorted out in the megaesophagus patient so let's review what happens in a typical evaluation of a regurgitating patient.

Dermatomyositis This condition involves a congenital blood vessel defect in the skin, usually in the face, and certain muscles. The abnormal blood vessels lead to poor oxygenation of affected tissues and inflammation results as tissue damage occurs from lack of oxygen. The muzzle gets scabs and ulcers result but moderately affected dogs have muscle damage affecting facial muscles and megaesophagus can result. Collies and Shetland sheepdogs are predisposed.

The Diagnostic Plan

First, the megaesophagus must be diagnosed. This is done with radiographs (x-rays). If megaesophagus is not obvious on plain films, it is better not to use contrast studies with barium if possible. This is because megaesophagus patients tend to inhale or aspirate food contents that back up in their throats. This is dangerous enough when the material is simply food but if barium becomes inhaled, the body has great difficulty removing it from the lungs. Still, sometimes this is the only way to see the megaesophagus.

The next step is to determine whether or not the animal has aspiration pneumonia from inhaling regurgitated food material. The same radiographs used to diagnose the megaesophagus can be used to determine if the pet has aspiration pneumonia, though just because the chest is clean at one point does not mean aspiration will not occur in the future. The owner of the megaesophagus dog must be vigilant for cough, listlessness, appetite loss, and/or nasal discharge. It is common for the megaesophagus patient to experience multiple episodes of aspiration pneumonia; it is an on-going problem and on-going concern as long as the pet has megaesophagus.

Chest radiographs in combination with a history of cough, nasal discharge, and the presence of fever usually indicate pneumonia. Usually the chest radiographs will show disease in the areas of the chest that are lowest in the standing animal as this is where gravity draws inhaled material. Aspiration pneumonia makes the case much more serious as pneumonia can be a life-threatening condition.

After megaesophagus has been confirmed and the patient has been assessed for aspiration, diagnostics continue as a search for a treatable underlying cause begins and a search for the medical problems listed above begins. Despite all the diagnostic tests, the majority of megaesophagus cases are idiopathic, which means that no underlying cause can be found. The patient with idiopathic megaesophagus is usually age 5 to 12 years in age and a large breed dog.

How to Care for a Dog With Megaesophagus Many dogs with megaesophagus can live relatively normal lives, but this requires careful home management and regular vet visits. The primary goals of long-term care are to provide nourishment and prevent aspiration.

Antacids are often used to control acid reflux. Various medications may be helpful to manage pain and protect the GI tract. Your vet may also recommend a supplement or herb, such as slippery elm, which lubricates and protects the lining of the GI tract.

Some dogs with severe megaesophagus need to have a stomach tube placed because they cannot keep food down at all. However, there are several techniques that help dogs with megaesophagus that don't require tube feeding. Your vet can help you develop a management plan for your dog's specific needs.

Upright Feeding Feeding dogs in an upright or standing position uses gravity to move food to the stomach. One of the easiest ways to do this is with a special high chair. We love Bailey Chairs 4 Dogs—they make cute yet functional customized chairs for upright feeding. You can also use a laundry basket or make your own contraption.

The key is to feed your dog while he is standing on his two back legs (and resting his front paws on the chair). Dogs should remain in the vertical position for 10-15 minutes after each meal.

Know What to Feed and When Many dogs with megaesophagus do best when fed small, frequent meals—often three to five times a day. Some dogs do best with “meatballs” of canned food because they are less likely to get stuck in the esophagus. Others respond better to food made into a slurry (a smoothie-like consistency). You may need to try a few different techniques to discover what works best for your pup. Your vet may also recommend a special diet or supplements to increase nutritional value.

Dog Food - Canine-Megaesophagus: All About ME

Dog food reviews and ratings: <http://www.dogfoodadvisor.com>

Updated comprehensive guide on whether you should go grain-free with your dog food on a sister site to the one above: <https://yourdogadvisor.com/grain-free-dog-food/>

These links take you to the following information: Dog Food Reviews by Brand: <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/dog-food-reviews/brand>

Best Dog Foods: <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/> Dog owners like to ask... “What’s the Best Dog Food?” But think about that for a moment. Let it sink in. How could a one-size-fits-all dog food be “best” for every dog? Truth is... Finding the best food for your particular dog depends on your answer to a few more specific questions. Like... Are you feeding a puppy? Or an adult? A large breed... or small? Do you prefer dry food... or wet? What about grain-free?

After reviewing the labels of hundreds of dog food brands, we've narrowed our choices down to a few specific categories. Best Dog Food Brands by Category. The following lists include The Dog Food Advisor's safest and most recommended brands. Click the link below that best describes your particular dog as well as your own feeding preferences. Best Puppy Foods <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/best-puppy-foods/> Best Dry Dog Foods <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/best-dry-dog-foods/> Best Wet Dog Foods <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/best-wet-dog-foods/> Best Grain Free Dog Foods <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/best-grain-free-dog-foods/> Best Raw Dog Foods <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/raw-dog-food/> Best Small Breed Dog Foods <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/best-small-breed-dog-food/> Best Dog Foods for Allergies <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/hypoallergenic-dog-foods/> Best Dog Foods for <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/weight-loss-dog-foods/>

Best Puppy Foods: <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/best-dog-foods/best-puppy-foods/>

Dog Food Recalls: At this link, the list of dog food recalls reported since 2009 is sorted by date. <https://www.dogfoodadvisor.com/dog-food-recalls/>