

Expansion of the Esophagus (Megaesophagus)

Abnormal dilation or stretching of the esophagus (also called megaesophagus) can be caused by a congenital defect (see [Digestive Disorders of Dogs: Esophagus](#)), or it can occur in an adult dog, either alone or together with other diseases. Congenital megaesophagus (generally diagnosed in dogs soon after weaning) is a hereditary defect that occurs in Wire-haired Fox Terriers and Miniature Schnauzers. A tendency to occur in families has been reported in German Shepherds, Newfoundlands, Great Danes, Irish Setters, Chinese Shar-Peis, Greyhounds, and cats. Some causes of megaesophagus include myasthenia gravis, systemic lupus erythematosus, polymyositis, hypoadrenocorticism, lead poisoning, dysautonomia, nervous system disorders including cancer, and possibly hypothyroidism. Megaesophagus can also occur as a result of injury of the esophagus, the presence of a foreign object in the esophagus, or compression of the esophagus.

The primary sign of megaesophagus is regurgitation. Dogs with megaesophagus will suddenly start regurgitating undigested food soon after eating and will lose weight. Respiratory signs such as coughing and difficulty breathing may occur. A chest x-ray will show air, fluid, or food in the distended esophagus. Other tests may also be performed to view the esophagus and determine the cause and extent of the enlargement.

If an associated disease is causing megaesophagus, it must be treated. Surgery is often needed to correct blood vessel abnormalities. There is no specific medical treatment for megaesophagus with no known cause, but it may be managed by feeding the dog with the upper body in an elevated position of at least 45 degrees. Allowing the dog to eat in this position—by having the dog stand on a ramp or with its front legs on a platform with the food bowl higher—has been found to help. Keeping the dog in this position for at least 15 minutes after eating allows gravity to help the food move down the esophagus.

Changing the texture of the dog's diet is usually necessary. The type of food that will best prevent vomiting varies from dog to dog. Soft gruel might work for some dogs, and others might do best with dry or canned foods. Feeding the dog in frequent small meals is usually helpful. The food should be high in calories to help the dog maintain its weight.

The overall outlook for dogs with this condition is guarded. Sixty per cent of dogs with megaesophagus tend to develop aspiration pneumonia or fibrosis of the lungs due to recurrent pneumonia, which may shorten their lifespan.

