

PYOMETRA

Pyometra is an infection of the lining of the uterus. It is a serious, potentially life-threatening disease that can affect any non-spayed female dog or cat.

What causes pyometra?

Pyometra is established as a result of hormonal changes. If pregnancy does not occur for several estrus (heat) cycles, the lining continues to increase in thickness until cysts form within it. The thickened, cystic lining secretes fluids that create an ideal environment in which bacteria can grow.

How do bacteria get into the uterus?

The cervix is the gateway to the uterus. It remains tightly closed except during estrus. When it is open, bacteria that are normally found in the vagina can enter the uterus rather easily. If the uterus is normal, the bacteria are unlikely to survive. However, when the uterine wall is thickened and cystic, perfect conditions exist for bacterial growth. Due to the changes, the muscles of the uterus cannot contract properly and the bacteria cannot be expelled.

When does pyometra occur?

Pyometra can occur in any intact female dog or cat. However, middle-aged and older dogs are at greatest risk. After many years of estrus cycles without pregnancy, the uterine wall undergoes the changes that promote this disease. The typical time for pyometra to occur is about 1-2 months after your pet's last heat. It's possible for a *stump pyometra* to occur in the small part of the uterus left behind after spaying, but this is rare. Normally pyometra is only a disease of non-spayed dogs and cats.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms depend on whether or not the cervix is open. If it is open, pus will drain from the uterus through the vagina to the outside. The pus may be yellow, brown or red in color. It is often noted on the skin or hair under the tail or on bedding and furniture where the dog has laid. But your dog may lick it up before you see it. Fever, lethargy, loss of appetite and depression may also be present.

If the cervix is closed, pus that forms is not able to drain to the outside, and so cannot be seen. It collects in the uterus causing it to swell. In some cases, swelling of the abdomen may be seen. The bacteria release toxins, which are absorbed into the bloodstream. These dogs often become severely ill very rapidly. They stop eating, become very listless and very depressed. Vomiting or diarrhoea may be present. Toxins from the bacteria affect the kidney's ability to retain fluid. Increased urine production occurs, and the dog may drink an increased amount of water. This occurs in both open- and closed-cervix pyometra.

How is pyometra treated?

Surgical Treatment: The preferred treatment is to surgically remove the uterus and ovaries. This is called an ovario-hysterectomy ("spay") and is the safest and most effective way of treating pyometra. However, these dogs are quite ill so the surgery is not as routine as the same surgery in a healthy dog. Great care must be taken with the enlarged weakened uterus. It must be removed from the abdomen without allowing any pus to leak out and contaminate other tissues. Antibiotics are given for 10-14 days. Successful surgery will usually have your pet feeling better in no time! However, severe infections or residual bacterial can lead to a persistent infection. This is why it is important to follow up with your regular veterinarian within a week of surgery.

