

Taking a good medical history about a pet usually involves a lot of questions. Depending on the answers, some of these questions are more revealing than others. While all of these inquiries are important, questions about a pet's thirst level are especially critical.

Pet owners frequently worry that their pet is not drinking enough water and are surprised when we don't get too excited about it, especially if the animal seems to feel and look well otherwise. But mention to your veterinarian that you think your pet is drinking too much water and you'll likely have a very interested doctor on your hands. Polydipsia is medical jargon for excess thirst and is definitely a symptom that warrants evaluation.

Dog and cats can have increased thirst for lots of reasons. Maybe it's especially warm out or they've been more active. This kind of increased thirst of course is transient and not worrisome. But when a pet is consistently drinking a lot of water with no simple explanation it may mean something more serious. Let's review some of the more common causes of polydipsia in our pets.

-Diabetes

It's fairly common knowledge in the human medical field that too much thirst can be a symptom of diabetes. This is true for pets as well. Diabetes is a serious disease that needs to be diagnosed early to prevent severe complications.

-Kidney disease

One of the many functions of the kidney system is to conserve and recycle water for the body. If a patient has reduced kidney function he/she will usually have excessive water loss from the body (seen as increased urine volume). This excessive loss of water from kidney disease results in increased thirst as the body tries to maintain water balance in the body.

-Cushing's Syndrome

This complex illness is a result of increased function of the adrenal glands and is fairly common in dogs, less so in cats. Untreated Cushing's disease can have some serious complications and should be accurately diagnosed and treated in pets. In most cases Cushing's syndrome is quite manageable.

-Urinary tract infections

Many pet owners can relate to this problem on a personal level. It's also a common problem in dogs. Symptoms include frequent, painful, and sometimes blood-tinged urination, and sometimes, excessive thirst. Cats don't get urinary tract infections nearly as commonly as dogs.

Now that you are convinced that excessive thirst is something to be concerned about, what is considered excessive water intake for a dog or cat? This is a little tricky because, like in people, perfectly benign things such as ambient temperature and humidity, activity level and ingestion of certain foods (think salty) can dramatically affect a pet's thirst.

A commonly used benchmark is that a dog or cat should not drink more than 20-30 milliliters per pound of body weight per day. 30 milliliters is about one fluid ounce, so a 10-pound dog should not drink more than 300 milliliters (10 lb. x 30 ml/lb./day = 300ml/day) or 10 ounces of water in a 24-hour period. Remember this is a general rule; most patients with true polydipsia are drinking much more than 30ml/lb/day.

The inevitable next question is how does one go about measuring water intake in their pet?

In most cases it's easy. You first need to limit your pet to an area where there is only one source of water and no other animals (or people) can drink from that source. An example might be keeping a cat in the house for 24 hours with a large bowl of fresh water (keep the toilet bowl lids closed!). At a convenient time in the morning put a known amount of water in the bowl. The volume of water you put in the bowl should be *more* than you expect the pet will drink over the next 24 hours. 24 hours later you measure how much water remains in the bowl. The difference in water volume between the starting and ending measurements is your pet's water intake for that day.

We usually recommend repeating this daily measurement for five to seven consecutive days, and then calculate an average daily intake. By doing this we avoid making conclusions on a spuriously high or low thirst day. Remember, if your pet has a health problem that causes him or her to drink too much this will be a consistent finding from day to day, not just a one day observance.

I encourage pet owners to learn how to measure their pet's water intake and periodically check it, especially if they see their pet is older or seen hanging around the water bowl more. Early detection of polydipsia by a pet owner can give the doctor a head start in diagnosing some complicated and serious medical conditions. And as we all know, early diagnosis of medical problems almost always leads to better, more effective therapy.

Dr. John Huebner practices companion animal medicine at Redwood Veterinary Hospital in Vallejo, CA. You can send your pet health questions to Dr. Huebner in care of the Vallejo Times Herald, (440 Curtola Parkway, Vallejo CA. 94590) or e-mail him via the "Ask Us" section at Redwoodvet.com.