

UNDER THE WEATHER

Huffing & Puffing in Dogs

It's summer. We sweat. They pant. It's that simple, really. Or is it? Every summer every single vet in India gets concerned pet parents with a common complaint, 'Doctor, I'm worried. My dog is panting excessively... is it serious?' So do I just dismiss it as the overactive imagination of an anxious guardian? Of course not. Panting can be due to various reasons, some normal and innocuous like weather change, others more serious, like heart failure.

So how do you, as a pet parent, interpret panting? when should you seek medical attention? Read on...

Let us start with the most common reason for panting – heat, and humidity. When the weather changes and temperature soars, we start sweating, but dogs don't have sweat glands on the body, therefore they pant as a means of heat dissipation. Similarly, when their own body temperature starts rising due to fever (or less commonly, heat stroke), they pant when their thermoregulatory mechanism kicks in.

Exertion and exercise also cause panting. Normally panting caused by exercise should settle down once your dog comes home, has water and relaxes in a comfortable, cool room, within half an hour.

Anxiety is another reason. You have seen dogs in unfamiliar surroundings pant (remember dog shows?) Calming and reassuring them, and firm handling helps in such a situation.

Obesity is a common cause of excessive panting in dogs, since an obese dog is more likely to overheat due to activity, or because the airways get compressed due to fat.

Brachycephalic (flat-faced) breeds like Pugs and Bulldogs have so many breathing difficulties that they have a syndrome (Brachycephalic Airway disease) named specially for them. This is due to narrow nostrils, an elongated soft palate and a narrow windpipe.



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When dogs are in pain, they pant. Restlessness, reluctance to sit or lie down, licking or biting at the painful area are all signs that your dog has some pain or discomfort that needs attention.

Which are the disease patterns that cause panting? Respiratory as well as heart disease are the most common causes in sick dogs, since panting is also a mechanism for oxygenating blood.

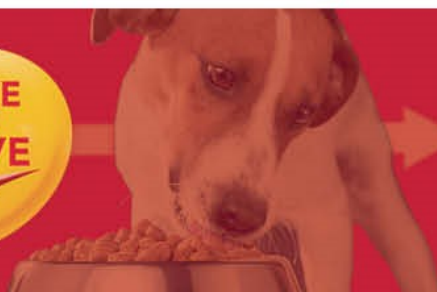
Pneumonia, pleural effusion, pericardial effusion, congestive heart failure... The list is long, and the common symptom is panting. If your vet hears abnormal heart or lung sounds, or if you see a change in tongue colour, investigations are needed to definitively diagnose and treat the problem.

Changes in blood gases due to renal failure, liver disease and diabetes can also cause panting. Sometimes your dog's adrenal glands produce too much of the stress hormone, cortisol, which can also cause panting, along with excessive thirst and a pot-bellied appearance. Certain medications, specially corticosteroids (oral as well as locally applied) can cause panting. Talk to your vet about your dog's medications, so he/she can decide if that's contributing to the panting.

The normal respiratory rate for a dog is between 10 and 30 breaths per minute. You can easily count the respiratory rate yourself at home – count the number of times your dog's chest heaves in a minute. Do this in a quiet, well ventilated and cool room. If the resting respiratory rate is above 30 breaths per minute, make an appointment with your vet. Make sure you wait for at least 30 minutes after a walk to allow your dog to cool off before counting the respiratory rate. The resting respiratory rate (RRR) is also valuable feedback for your vet if your dog is suffering from chronic heart disease, since it can help track efficacy of medications. So make an appointment to see your vet immediately if: panting starts suddenly, if there are signs of pain, panting is constant and intense or if your dog's tongue appears pale or blue. Do not delay!



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