



Straining to Poop in Cats and Dogs

There are many causes of straining to poop in cats and dogs. The most common causes are diarrhea, constipation, or overly full anal glands, which are usually an “easy fix”. Other causes, like gastrointestinal blockage, are more complicated to treat. It is helpful for foster caregivers to have a good plan for straining to poop, should it occur. It is good for them to know what to look for, recognize when emergency veterinary attention is needed, and understand what care can be given at home.

Differentiating Between Straining to Pee and Poop

- The symptoms of each are very similar. This is why you should monitor for both pooping and peeing. If there is pee coming out, is it a normal stream or is it small amounts? Is it a normal yellow color or does it appear bloody or blood-tinged?
- The Maddie’s Straining to Pee in Cats and Dogs flash class should help with recognizing symptoms that are more specific to peeing.

Monitoring Straining to Poop

- Monitoring begins with recognizing symptoms that your foster pet is uncomfortable when trying to poop. You may notice this before it progresses to straining to poop:
 - Cats may go in and out of the litter box more frequently, and dogs may ask to go outside more often.
 - Pooping in inappropriate locations is very common. Cats sometimes associate their litter box with discomfort while eliminating, so will avoid using it. Dogs often have an increased urgency to poop, and may not get outside quickly enough. While accidents in the house can be behavior related, assume a medical cause until proven otherwise. It is very important to remember that – contrary to popular belief – pets do not pee or poop in inappropriate areas for “spite” or because they are “angry.”
 - You may notice excessive licking of the anus, unusual circling behavior, and in more severe cases, crying out in pain while attempting to poop, abdominal discomfort, vomiting, lethargy, or lack of appetite.



- Be sure to check for matted hair and poop blocking the anus. Long-haired pets can have this problem if they are not regularly clipped or groomed.
- Note if the pet is scooting, and if there is any swelling on the anus around the 4 o'clock and 8 o'clock positions. Both point to overly full anal glands that need to be expressed. Do not attempt to do this unless you are experienced in doing so. Contact your foster manager for help.
- Be aware that straining to poop can lead to a prolapsed rectum. Keep a close eye on the anus for any red, fleshy tissue coming out of it.
- Pay close attention to the fecal consistency. This will help determine whether the straining to poop is due to diarrhea or constipation, or something else.
 - The [Purina Fecal Scoring System](#) is a commonly used, photo-based chart that gives a numeric score based on how soft or hard a fecal sample is. This scoring system is useful for describing fecal consistency to the foster manager.
- Look to see if the poop is bloody or blood-tinged, and if there is any mucous in it. Constipated pets often have blood-tinged poop covered with mucous. Bloody stool is a cause for concern, it may indicate a more serious medical condition.
- Keep an eye out for worms or foreign bodies; these can cause straining. Be sure to save poop containing worms or foreign bodies for the veterinary team to examine.

When to Contact the Foster Manager

- You should contact the foster manager when you notice straining to poop. Regardless of the volume of poop coming out, straining is never normal.
- Mild to moderate straining occurs when the pet shows slightly increased effort to poop, and there is a normal to slightly decreased output; this may be an emergency.
- Severe straining to poop occurs when the pet shows more significantly increased effort to poop, and there is little to no output; this is definitely an emergency. This is seen with gastrointestinal blockage, and with an extremely severe form of constipation called obstipation. Both of these conditions may require anesthesia and surgery.
- Even if there is no obvious straining, discomfort while pooping should be brought to the foster manager's attention. These symptoms include crying out in pain while attempting to poop, scooting, and excessive licking of the anus. Your foster pet should see a veterinarian as soon as possible, before the problem becomes more severe or an emergency.
- Poop that is bloody, or that contains worms or foreign bodies, is also a cause for concern and should be reported.
- A prolapsed rectum is an emergency.



- Don't hesitate to contact the foster manager if you have any concerns or questions. It's better to be safe than sorry.

What Foster Caregivers Can Do at Home

- Gather History
 - Gathering history for the veterinary team can help with diagnosis and treatment of straining to poop.
 - Have there been any recent changes in the diet? If so, what food was being fed before and after?
 - Is your foster pet on any medications that might be causing diarrhea or constipation?
 - Is there evidence of ingestion of bones, garbage, pieces of toys, or anything like that?
 - What symptoms are you noticing while your pet is pooping? Have they gotten better, worse, or stayed the same since first seen?
- Save a Poop Sample
 - Save a poop sample for the veterinary team to examine and test.
 - It should be as fresh as possible, preferably less than 12 hours old, but no more than 24.
 - The sample needs to be kept refrigerated until it can be brought to the shelter or rescue group.
 - It can be difficult to collect a poop sample when diarrhea is on the watery side. Try to get as much solid as possible.
- Encourage Water Intake
 - Encourage water intake. If there is diarrhea it will help prevent dehydration, and if there is constipation it will help hydrate the intestines so that the poop can pass through more easily.
 - Use pet water fountains and place more bowls of fresh water around the house.
 - Feed watered-down canned food.
 - With cats, you can offer juice from a can of salmon or tuna, either by itself or mixed with canned food. You can also entice them to play with and drink running water from faucets.
- Daily Assessment
 - Daily Assessment is important. This will allow you to monitor whether your foster pet is getting better, worse, or staying the same. It is also important to watch for additional symptoms like vomiting, not eating, or lethargy.
 - To learn more about how to monitor for signs of illness or stress, how to check for dehydration, and what to do if your foster pet has diarrhea, see these Maddie's flash classes:
 - Maddie's How to Check Foster Pets for Dehydration



- Maddie's Daily Assessment of Foster Pets
- Maddie's Diarrhea in Kittens and Puppies (0-8 weeks)
- Maddie's Diarrhea in Cats and Dogs (9 weeks and older)
- Give Medication and Special Diets
 - Give medications and special diets as directed by a veterinarian.
 - Medications used depend on what caused the straining to poop. Metronidazole and dewormers are commonly used to treat diarrhea, and stool softeners and laxatives for constipation. Do not discontinue any of these medications too early, even if the straining to poop has resolved. Finish out the prescription to help prevent recurrence of the problem.
 - Additional fiber can help with either diarrhea or constipation. Canned pumpkin can temporarily be mixed in with the pet's regular food. Be sure to use plain canned pumpkin only, not pumpkin pie mix or spiced pumpkin mix.
 - There are also high fiber veterinary prescription diets like Hill's® W/D, Purina® OM, and Royal Canin® Gastrointestinal Fiber Response.
 - Other diets may be needed, like low fiber or low residue diets.
 - If your pet is on a prescription diet, it is important to avoid feeding other foods and treats unless instructed to do so by a veterinarian. Feeding anything other than the prescription diet, in many cases, defeats the purpose of giving it in the first place.
- Follow-Up Appointments
 - Be diligent about follow-up appointments as recommended by a veterinarian, even if your foster pet seems to be doing great. The veterinarian may want to give additional enemas for constipation, recheck the anal glands, or repeat radiographs to see if foreign bodies have passed through the gastrointestinal tract.

