

Coping (and Thriving) with EPI



Isa, my beautiful GSD, was about 6 months old when the puzzling, non-stop diarrhea and voracious appetite developed. Then, even more worryingly, her weight began peeling off. The strict white rice and boiled hamburger diet that had soothed all of our other GSDs' sensitive tummies did nothing for Isa. Diarrhea medications were useless. Horrified, people looked at my bony shepherd and whispered, "Neglect." But really, I was desperately doing everything I could to get one solid poop out of her and keep one pound on her.

Finally, the diagnosis: *Exocrine Pancreatic Insufficiency* (EPI). To our relief, there was good news—it could be treated. But, there was bad news, too—it could not be cured and could be *very* difficult to manage.

As I sat on the cold exam room floor and cradled my skin-n-bones pup, the vet issued a litany of warnings: *"Very severe case...lifetime of expensive medications...frequent veterinary treatments, shortened life span, a host of potential painful and difficult health problems..."* I felt helpless as I looked at my sick pup whose vital pancreas was a dud.

Fast-forward 8 years—Isa is one Frisbee-loving, free-spirited, confident, smart-as-a-whip dog. She did develop several other chronic health conditions (though managed with medications and without discomfort), and we certainly have bouts where the EPI gets the upper hand. Still, Isa has had one heck of a happy, active 8 years (working as a certified Therapy Dog of Vermont and playing some competitive frisbee). And, she shows no signs of slowing down.

However, that initial year after her diagnosis was not easy. And, just last year, Isa faced a serious, "perfect storm" health crisis when the EPI, a vitamin B deficiency, problems with competing medications, and an out-of-remission muscle disorder all hit at once. It took us over a year to get her back to full weight and health. EPI is definitely about dealing with day-to-day management over the long haul.

Despite that desperate beginning, Isa has helped me see that it is possible to be a *healthy, happy* dog who *happens* to have EPI. In fact, Isa and I have discovered a few healthy-lifestyle tricks over the years. I'll share them with you in the order that Isa barks them out for us.

What is EPI?

In Exocrine Pancreatic Insufficiency (EPI), the pancreas fails to excrete enough of the enzymes needed for proper food digestion. Without enzymes to break down the food, nutrients cannot be absorbed, and the dog wastes away.

There is no cure for EPI, but there are treatments. The first thing an owner suspecting EPI must do is to take the dog to the vet for proper tests and diagnosis. The treatment will include pancreatic enzyme supplements, usually a powder, added to the food.

With EPI, the organ, immune, nervous, and all other systems may be compromised to some degree. A lack of nutrients can result in temperament changes as well.

(Sources: www.merckvetmanual.com; www.epi4dogs.com)



GOLD STAR Dog Training

Find a Vet You Can Work With

- EPI is a lifelong condition. Anticipate needing your vet much more than you might for a non-EPI dog. Accept that you will probably be putting your vet's son through college or paying off her mortgage.
- Find a vet who answers your questions, will talk with you on the phone for quick medication or diet questions, lets
- you come in for an occasional quick weight check, and either knows about EPI or is willing to research/talk to other vets to get answers you may need. Having a good working relationship with your vet is critical to successfully managing this condition.

Become a Poop Connoisseur

- Having a dog with EPI means becoming well-acquainted with the rainbow of colors your dog may excrete, as well as poop consistency (Isa can poop different colors and consistencies within the SAME bowel movement!). Seriously though, poop is an excellent and immediate indicator of your EPI dog's health—and an excellent warning if adjustments need to be made in diet and/or medication.

Find a Balance and Keep a Journal

- A healthy EPI dog is needs the right food and medication(s). Especially in the early stages, keep a daily journal—what your dog ingests (both what you intend to feed her and those *oops* moments, like a donut snatched off a table), the dosage and timing of medications, weight and physical condition, what the poop looks like, and any changes in behavior, energy level, etc. This will help you understand your dog's system, give your vet a place to start when adjusting diet and medication, and possibly identify the culprit if the EPI flares up.

Training without Treats/Ideas for Occupiers

- If your dog is like mine, the tiniest deviation from the medicated food, or the smallest treat, can launch us into several days of diarrhea. So, training my dog with food and leaving her peanut butter-stuffed Kongs when I went out was simply out of the question. So, for training, get your dog excited about non-food rewards like vocal and physical praise and toys. Also, if you must leave your dog with something to chew on during the day, try bones that are your dog won't ingest much of (like nylabones); chicken stock, beef stock, or pumpkin frozen in a Kong can also work. But, *always* check with your vet—and watch your dog's poop!

Your Two New Best Friends: Pumpkin and Famotidine

- We tried a variety of pancreatic enzymes, many stomach-appeasing medications, and all sorts of diets, but still struggled to get Isa's EPI under control. Two wonder substances (given with the enzymes) seemed to do the trick for us—and if you are struggling too, you may want to ask your vet about these. The first was adding a tablespoon of plain old, nothing-added canned pumpkin to each meal. The other was famotidine (commonly known as Pepcid®) 30 minutes before each meal. Those did wonders, and they are now a regular part of every meal.

