Stress can cause diarrhea in dogs and cats

 “Liver overacting on Spleen” is a traditional Chinese veterinary medicine (TCVM) concept that describes how stress can cause loose stool or other [digestive](http://www.examiner.com/topic/digestive/articles) upset. In TCVM, the liver is responsible for making sure that the body’s energy or qi (pronounced chee) is flowing smoothly. When there is stagnation or sluggishness in this flow of energy, pain, stiffness, and disease can result. What obstructs the smooth flow of energy? Stress, pain, pensiveness, improper [diet](http://www.examiner.com/topic/diet), not enough exercise, too much or not enough stimulation, too much competition for food or attention, too much cold, damp or hot in an environment can all potentially create qi stagnation. Stress can be any change in routine, diet, play time amount or type, number of visitors in a house…this is a subjective term that is not restricted to paperwork or driving in traffic—the things humans may find stressful. Additionally, stress in their people can definitely rub off on the animals, too.
      When the liver cannot maintain smooth energetic currents, it tends to have an oppressive action on the concept of “spleen” in TCVM, which is generally understood as digestion. Often this presents as [diarrhea](http://www.examiner.com/topic/diarrhea), bloody or mucous-filled stool. It can also cause constipation, [vomiting](http://www.examiner.com/topic/vomiting/articles), and lack of appetite, depending on the constitution of a particular pet. In biomedical understanding, when a body is stressed, more cortisol, or stress hormone, is released from the adrenal glands. This is part of the “fight or flight” mechanism that shunts blood away from the maintenance and repair organs of the body, toward the arms and legs. This helps someone to run or fight in a dangerous situation. But it doesn’t have to be a life-or-death situation to activate this response. Stress can be much more mild but have the same result with increased release of cortisol. The body tends to try to empty out the gut much more quickly at these times, causing a more rapid transit time, and thus less time to absorb water out of the stool. The lining of the colon can be inflamed, and will often secrete more mucous at the same time. This can result in soft, slimy stool, with blood if the inflammation is severe enough to cause tiny vessel rupture.
      Plenty of exercise, a healthy balanced diet, avoiding abrupt food, environment, or routine changes can minimize this stress response. There are TCVM herbal formulas, food therapy, and [acupuncture](http://www.examiner.com/topic/acupuncture) points for smoothing liver and spleen function, as well as regulation of the qi flow in general. Of course, always make sure there are no intestinal parasites or dietary indiscretion, as these can look similar, resulting in diarrhea as well. If it’s a puppy with severe or bloody diarrhea, have them checked for parvovirus right away. If you know your pet tends to get stressed easily, providing distractions and extra exercise can help to smooth their flow of qi, and maintain healthy digestion.