

Accident Prevention and First Aid Treatments for the Pet Owner

**By Dr. Matthew Kearns and Dr. Christopher Winkler
Animal Emergency Service—Selden & Commack**

This article contains information on some of the most common problems we deal with at Animal Emergency Service. To help you better prepare yourself for accidents and first aid situations that may occur at home with your pet, we have prepared this information to address some of the most commonly asked questions/concerns.

Introduction

Every pet owner wants to be prepared to do everything possible for his/her pet to insure that a first aid situation can be handled at home (to avoid a trip to the emergency clinic) or to make sure that he/she acts promptly in getting the pet to the veterinarian's office or the emergency clinic. In doing so, there are several questions we as pet owners can ask ourselves to facilitate this:

1. We all talk about child-proofing our homes. What about pet-proofing? Is your house pet-proof? Is there anything within reach that your pet could get into that he/she shouldn't? Has every room in the house been checked thoroughly for this?
2. How about your yard? Have you checked the perimeter fence for holes? Is the gate open? Can your pet escape? Is there anything in the yard that your pet can step on, accidentally ingest, or otherwise injure itself on? This includes small foreign objects and low hanging branches.
3. Have you talked to your regular veterinarian as COMPLETELY as possible about ANY medical condition your pet might have? This includes diabetes, pregnancy, and long-term management of certain illnesses. Your regular vet is available for any questions you might have about being prepared for an emergency situation at home.

Common Emergencies We Encounter at the Veterinary Emergency Hospital

The most common question asked when an owner calls one of our emergency hospitals is, "Do I need to bring my pet in to be seen at the hospital?" The answer to that question depends on the following:

Is your pet eating and drinking?

- If he/she is eating and drinking, is he/she keeping it down?
- Is the urine/stool normal?
- Is the pet bright, alert, and acting normal and responsive to you?

If the answer to any of these questions is “No”, then the answer to the question “Should I bring my pet in” is **YES, WITHOUT DELAY**. It is always better to play it safe.

Here is a list of common scenarios that we receive in the emergency room, what can be done about them at home (if anything), and when to rush to your regular veterinarian’s office or emergency clinic. As you review each scenario, keep the following in mind:

“Yes” means that there may be a treatment that can be performed at home, BUT ALWAYS call your regular veterinarian or emergency clinic for additional instructions or to let them know that you bringing your pet to the hospital .

“No” means that there is no effective intervention you can perform at home prior to bringing your pet to the vet’s office/emergency clinic (give your clinic a call and then get your pet to the clinic IMMEDIATELY).

Some common emergency scenarios:

Trauma Is there anything you can do? **YES.**

Lacerations can occur from your pet stepping on a foreign object or running quickly through brush and trees. Direct pressure with a bandage can help control any bleeding that may occur.

Hit by Car (HBC) accidents may also cause serious soft tissue trauma and/or bone fractures. Many HBC accidents can be prevented. Most canine HBC accidents occur when pet owners let their pets out before and after work and before going to bed. These are the times your dog needs the most supervision in the yard. Cats are much more difficult to monitor if they are outdoor animals—keeping cats indoors may be the only solution to preventing possible HBC accidents. HBC patients should be taken to your vet or the emergency hospital immediately, even if the pet appears fine. We need to rule out internal injuries to the heart and other organs caused by the shock and impact of the accident.

Falling injuries may cause fractures as well. Stabilize fractures if possible. Rolled up newspapers, magazines, or pieces of wood/sticks can help as splints.

Some pets manage to bite or scratch out their sutures/staples after surgery. This problem may be managed temporarily with a bandage or even a T-shirt tied in place before bringing the pet to the clinic.

Toenail injuries are common but may need to be looked at by a vet to remove toenail debris hanging loose and even start antibiotic therapy if your pet likes to go outside a lot. If your pet’s nail is bleeding after a nail-trimming, Quik-Stop powder from the pet-shop or even flour or a bar of soap applied to the end of the nail may help stop the bleeding.

Choking

Is there anything you can do? **YES.**

True choking victims can be managed with a variation of the Heimlich maneuver. Hairballs are usually eventually coughed up on their own. If it is a collar-issue, switch from a neck leash to a chest harness. This will relieve a great deal of strain on your arm as well! Harness leashes are available at Petco. Coughing may be caused by kennel cough, heartworm disease, or other heart or respiratory illnesses. If the signs of coughing and choking are not caused by any these factors, your pet may be having difficulty breathing.

Trouble breathing

Is there anything you can do? **YES.** (But not much).

Use Minimal Restraint. Rough handling of a pet may make stress and breathing difficulties even worse, especially for cats. Oxygen would be the thing to give here, but it is not readily available and not easy to give correctly. We have oxygen tents and cages for this in the hospital. Is asthma the cause, and is the pet on medication for asthma? If nothing works, we recommend bringing the pet in for treatment. A chest X-Ray may be necessary to diagnose the cause.

Eye Illness/Injury

Is there anything you can do? **YES.**

Cover an injured eye with a paper cup that fits over the whole injury (including any foreign object that may be lodged in the eye or the lid) before bringing your pet to the vet's right away. **DO NOT** try to remove any foreign objects first! Cases of acute blindness should also be brought in right away. If the pet's eye is tearing excessively or has a discharge, it may be a sign of a respiratory illness or other serious illness.

Seizures

Is there anything you can do? **YES.**

Make sure the pet cannot hurt itself **OR YOU!** Remove objects from the pet's vicinity that the pet may hurt itself on, and don't get bitten! Your pet may not recognize you until well after the seizure is over. If possible and safe, take the pet to the vet's office or emergency clinic during the seizure, or between seizures if not. The clinic will usually recommend bloodwork and keeping the pet under observation overnight in case of additional seizures.

**Diabetic Insulin Crisis
(low blood sugar)**

Is there anything you can do? **YES.**

Try placing Karo syrup or sugar solution on the gums. This can also be done with a puppy that appears very weak (low blood sugar). Measure the pet's response to the syrup and contact your vet or the emergency clinic right away.

Straining to urinate

Is there anything you can do? **NO.**

Bring the pet in immediately. There may be an injury or infection of the kidneys or bladder, or there may be kidney or bladder stones causing the problem. This is an emergency that needs to be dealt with right away!

Acute Collapse

Is there anything you can do? **NO.**

Unable to Rise

Bring the pet in immediately. Dachshunds and similar breeds may have a slipped disk in their spines. Cats may have a serious and painful condition called Saddle-Thrombus if they cannot rise on their back legs. The pet may have also been injured in an accident (See Trauma). Some serious tumors can cause this as well.

Limping

Is there anything you can do? **YES.**

Stabilize the limb with a splint as mentioned above, if you suspect a fracture. Be careful when handling your pet for transport. If it is sudden and the pet cannot put weight on the leg at all, it may be a fracture or dislocation. This should be checked by your vet right away. Gradual lameness over longer periods, which seems to be getting worse, may be caused by arthritis or Lyme disease, or other illnesses. Lyme disease is a VERY common disease on Long Island, and causes limping, generalized joint pain, lethargy and fever. This needs to be checked by your vet as well. Ask your vet at yearly wellness examinations about how to prevent Lyme disease, and about preventative medications for arthritis.

Limping cats that go outdoors may have been bitten by another cat in a fight, and have a cat-bite abscess. These need to be treated by your vet or emergency clinic. Your cat can also contract deadly and debilitating viruses from such a bite, like FeLV and FIV. Have them vaccinated for these viruses if they go outdoors, or better yet, keep them inside, especially if they are declawed. All dogs and cats should have current Rabies and distemper vaccinations as well.

Nonproductive vomiting, retching in Large breed dogs

Is there anything you can do? **NO.**

Bring the pet in immediately. This may be an emergency syndrome known as Bloat, or GDV (Gastric Dilation and Volvulus). This condition, if diagnosed, requires immediate lifesaving treatment and surgery to correct. While the complete cause is still undetermined and pets may still get the disease even when owners follow all the guidelines, it may be prevented by not feeding your pet 1 hour before or after hard exercise. If you let your pet out after getting home from work, try not to feed them for another hour. Don't feed your pet large meals all at once—give smaller meals more frequently throughout the day (good advice for any-size pet).

Frequent, projectile vomiting, vomiting after eating, not eating for several days, bloody diarrhea

Is there anything you can do? **NO.**

Bring the pet in immediately. This may be caused by foreign objects that were swallowed and became lodged in the GI tract, requiring surgery. Or it could be caused by a syndrome called Hemorrhagic Gastroenteritis, which requires immediate fluid therapy in the hospital.

Pets seem to get stomach upsets as often as we get colds and flu. One episode of vomiting or diarrhea may be of no consequence. It is the repeated episodes that may mean something serious is occurring. Often pets vomit after being given human food (off the table, etc) that they have never had before. Do NOT give human food unless directed by your regular veterinarian! Healthy pets do not need it, and giving it excessively can cause obesity and long term health issues such as diabetes and pancreatitis. Milk is a tasty treat for cats, but can cause stomach upset, gas and diarrhea. Bones left over from dinner may be chewed into sharp shards that can puncture the stomach and bowels.

*****If an animal has vomited, for whatever reason, DO NOT offer ANY food or water for at least 4-6 hours.***** We know there is a concern for dehydration, but many times an animal needs to rest its stomach (if it is a less serious cause of vomiting). Giving food or water too quickly may make things worse. A pet diving into the food or water dish after vomiting will often immediately vomit again. If you are very concerned, it is better to check with or visit your regular veterinarian or emergency veterinary hospital before considering food or water. If the pet has been vomiting or has not eaten in two days, bring it down immediately.

(Bloody) diarrhea in a puppy. Is there anything you can do? **NO.**

Bring the pet in immediately. Your puppy could have a life-threatening virus such as Parvovirus, or might be heavily infested with worms. Persistent diarrhea left unchecked can dehydrate small puppies very quickly, so it is a good idea to bring them in right away before this occurs.

Pregnant-straining for 2 hours without giving birth Is there anything you can do? **NO.**

Bring the pet in immediately. The pet is not delivering properly if it has been this long without passing a pup or kitten, and needs help.

Dog/Cat pregnancies generally last for about 63 days. Whether the pregnancy is planned or not, you should see your regular vet if you plan on seeing it through. The pups or kittens can be seen by an X-Ray 45 days after conception. Be sure to ask your regular veterinarian what you can expect when delivery time rolls around.

Heatstroke

Is there anything you can do? **YES.**

Move the pet to a cool, dry place out of direct sunlight, and cool the pet with cool tepid running water over the entire body, especially the paws. It is a good idea to have a digital rectal thermometer designated for your pet, to not only have a baseline rectal temperature, but also to take repeat rectal temperatures. Once the temperature is below 103F, STOP trying to cool the pet! The body temperature should continue to come down after the running water treatment has stopped, but you can get a rebound hypothermia (low body temperature) from excessive cooling. If the pet begins to shiver, wrap it in dry towels and attempt to re-warm it. The next step is to bring your pet to your regular vet's office or emergency clinic immediately.

To avoid heatstroke, do not exercise your pet on extremely hot or humid days. If you do take them for a walk on a hot day, make sure it is on a leash and only walk them in the early morning and later evening. Never leave your pet in a hot environment (a car or a poorly ventilated room) for any period of time. If your pet stays outside in the yard on warm days, have water and sources of shade readily available.

Poisoning

Is there anything you can do? **YES.**

Call your vet's office or the National Animal Poison Control Center (NAPCC) right away! Most emergency clinics will direct you to do this when you first call them up. (More about this later). **DO NOT** give your pet Syrup of Ipecac, Activated Charcoal, or Pepto Bismol and **DO NOT** induce vomiting in your pet **UNTIL** you have called and spoken to a veterinary emergency poison control representative or a licensed veterinarian first. Certain poisons (particularly those that are caustic) may cause more damage on the way back up. And if your pet is disoriented from the poison they may choke on their vomit, and even develop a secondary pneumonia. Sometimes it may be too late to make the pet vomit anyway—the poison may be well-absorbed already and other measures will need to be taken instead.

When you call, try to have both the trade name and the generic name of the poison (if possible). Check labels for this information. It is a good idea to have prescription information written down and kept in a separate place of records, because some pets will chew up not only the pills, but the entire bottle as well, including the label! If you end up bringing your pet into your vet or the emergency clinic, please bring the medication/poison with you, as well as any other medications the pet might normally be on.

Animal Emergency Service, PC, recommends the National Animal Poison Control Center (NAPCC). The NAPCC is staffed with veterinary toxicologists (experts in poisonings) and is dedicated to pets and pet owners. The poison control specialists are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year to handle any and all emergencies associated with poisoning. They will recommend steps to take that you can do at home, and/or whether to head straight to your vet's office or an emergency clinic. There is a \$45.00 consult fee, but it is well-worth the money—the human poison control center does not have all the information necessary to deal with poisonings in your pets. You will get a case number when you call. Remember to write it down, so that your vet can use it to refer to your pet's case should they need to discuss it with the NAPCC. **The NAPCC phone number is 1-888-426-4435.**

Some of the most common poisonings we encounter in the emergency room include:

- Chocolate** (Especially in dogs, left lying around, especially on holidays such as Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day, and Easter. Pet-proof your house!). Chocolate is more deadly to pets in the semi-sweet and baker's forms than the milk chocolate form, but any form can be harmful in sufficient quantities. Chocolate toxicosis causes hyperexcitability, rapid heart rate, and even seizures.
- Household Plants** Double-check that the plants in your house are not toxic to your pets, especially cats.
- Tylenol** (especially in cats), and Ibuprofen, Motrin, high doses of aspirin. These are usually given by well-meaning owners, but pets cannot metabolize these drugs like people can. They cause stomach ulcers and liver failure, and can kill cats very quickly. ALWAYS check with your veterinarian before giving these medications.
- Antifreeze** Pets love the taste, but it causes kidney failure when ingested. Antifreeze should never be left lying around, and spills should be cleaned up right away.
- Bio-Spot** (And other generic flea and tick shampoos and preventatives applied to the back of your pet's neck). Some of these products are NOT labeled for use in cats, and can cause seizures in cats and even small dogs. Use ONLY products recommended by your regular veterinarian for flea and tick prevention, and always read all product labels and instructions THOROUGHLY before purchasing and using an over-the-counter product.
- Rat Poison, Slug Bait, Moth balls, etc** These may be left around in a new house after the owner moves in, or been left outside to kill rats and other pests. Be sure to check a new house thoroughly, and if you are using these products be sure to pet-proof the house so that your pet does not come into these areas. Some of these poisons cause bleeding disorders, so if your pet has sudden bruising, a bloody nose, or blood in the urine or stool, give your regular vet or emergency clinic a call.

Prescription Medication Usually a family member's own medication lying about, or even the pet's medication given incorrectly. Pet-proof your house, and keep those prescription medications out of reach. Treat your pets like young children, for they are just as apt to swallow some of your pills as a toddler. Double-check how you are giving pet medications, and make sure it is the correct medication for the correct pet! Many times we get calls that an owner has given the incorrect dose, or given it to the wrong dog or cat in the house. Finally, double-check with others in the house so that medications are not given to pets twice! This is especially true for routine medications such as insulin injections and arthritis medication. Try having a dry-erase marker board up to indicate that a dose was given, and stick to it so that others do not double-up the medication.

What should I bring with me to the vet's office or emergency veterinary clinic?

1. Bring some form of identification. A Driver's License is recommended. Someone of proper age should be present—some emergency clinics may not allow minors to sign Consent-To-Treatment forms.
2. Bring the pet's prior records if you have them. Include prior history, such as past illnesses or injuries, allergies (to medications, food, etc), current medications and their information, and vaccination history.
3. Bring the pet's medications. Often a pet owner remembers a medication, but not the dosage size or other such important information. Bringing the medication in their own bottle will insure the vet receives this information. More importantly, if your pet is admitted to the hospital, he or she will have that medication available to them! Have all medication information written down elsewhere, in case your pet chews up the bottle.
4. If there was a poisoning or toxin in question, bring the offending agent with you. This includes the bag of chocolate, rat poison bottle, Bio-Spot box, the name of the household plant, or your own prescription medication.
5. Bring the correct pet! Believe it or not, some owners do forget which animal they're grabbed in the rush to the car. Especially when the animals are of the same breed or even litter mates.

Can you prescribe a medication over the phone that I can give at home?

No. We must first examine the pet and determine what is wrong before prescribing medications. We cannot give or recommend any medicines to give at home without having examined the pet.

Do you vaccinate pets as well?

No. We are an emergency facility only. Vaccinations should be seen through your regular veterinarian.

Some Extra Tips

Here are some general tips to keep in mind when dealing with emergencies either with your own pet, a friend/family member's pet, or a strange/stray animal:

-If an animal is frightened or in pain it may bite (even if it is normally friendly).

Consider using something to muzzle your pet, such as a store-bought muzzle, small pieces of rope, a tie, etc. Cats can be covered with a towel before moving. Please do not get yourself hurt trying to help a scared, injured, potentially dangerous animal. Also keep this in mind at your vet's office or emergency clinic. We may need to restrain and muzzle your pet at any time during its stay to prevent injury to your pet and our staff.

-Anything makes a good stretcher (flat piece of board, old door, a sheet of heavy cardboard, etc)

-Bite wounds or penetrating wounds. Try to keep the wound clean and moist until the animal can be transported to your regular veterinarian or an emergency veterinary hospital. Moistened clean cloths, gauze, etc can be used. If there is excessive bleeding direct pressure should be applied (consider an ACE bandage, other). Do not try to remove anything that is impaled into the pet.

-Bones fractures can be immobilized with a splint. A splint can be made up of rolled up magazines or newspapers, cardboard, or wood. If it is an open/compound fracture cover it with a clean moistened dressing. If the animal cannot (or will not) allow a splint to be applied, just try to keep them confined in a very small enclosure until you can transport them to either your regular veterinarian's office or an emergency veterinary hospital. A pet carrier works very well in this instance and is strongly recommended.

-CPR. While a full instruction in pet CPR technique is beyond the scope of this article, there are some guidelines we can give. If the animal stops breathing/heart stops consider the A-B-C's:

-Airway: First check to see if your pet is breathing before instituting CPR. If the pet is breathing, CPR chest compressions are NOT necessary! Check the mouth for

obstructions. If something is caught in the throat, carefully sweep it out with your finger. Be careful not to push the object in further, and don't get bitten!

-Breathing: Check for breathing before considering breathing for your pet. If your pet is not breathing, then either hold the mouth closed and breathe into the nostrils (large dogs) or place your mouth over both the pet's mouth and nostrils (small dogs and cats). Then give a small breath—a cheek-full is a good measurement for small dogs and cats. You should see the chest rise and fall if the airway is open.

-Circulation (Cardiovascular): After breathing for the pet, place the animal on its side. Check for a heartbeat—feel the side of the chest for beats. If the heart is beating, CPR chest compressions are NOT necessary! Just breathe for the pet. If there are no beats, start chest compressions. The heart in both dogs and cats sits right behind the elbow. That is where you should press. Use the palm of your hand and press firmly. We recommend 1 breath for every 5 compressions.

-Continue these procedures until:

1. The pet begins breathing on its own;
2. Someone takes over for you;
3. You are too tired to continue.

If you are the only one present, take the pet directly to the hospital. DO NOT try to do CPR while driving! If someone is with you, they may be able to drive while you do CPR.

Owner's First Aid Kit

As responsible pet owners we should all be prepared to deal with emergencies before they occur. Basic first aid on animals is many times no different than on ourselves. We, at Animal Emergency Service, recommend not only to have a basic idea of first aid for our pets but also a first aid kit. An owner's first aid kit does not really differ very much (if at all) from a basic first aid kit you might have for yourself or your family. A generic kit may even be created. If your pet has been diagnosed with a certain condition or disease that may need specific medications or equipment, these should be available in the kit for emergencies. Check with your regular veterinarian to be prepared. If you do not have a proper first aid kit (or wish to update the one you have) here is a list of things Animal Emergency Service recommends:

Blanket (space blanket)

Thermometer (rectal, dedicated for pet use. We recommend digital thermometers, as they stand less chance of breaking).

Pen light

Sterile 4x4 gauze pads

Sterile Dressing (small, medium, large)

Roll Gauze

1 and 2 inch white tape

Non stick (Telfa) bandages

Triangular bandage and safety pin

Cloth strips (for binding wounds and tying splints)

Betadine (wound cleanser)

Triple antibiotic ointment (such as Neosporin)

Scissors, tweezers

Instant cold pack

Hydrogen peroxide (to induce vomiting, AS PER A VETERINARIAN'S INSTRUCTIONS)

Quick-Stop Powder (for stopping cut toenail bleeds)

Muzzle (that fits your pet! Your pet may be painful, and may even bite you though not intending to. Having a muzzle on the pet before moving it may save you or another family member from grievous injury. Muzzles are available in pet shops such as Petco)

Splint

Glucose concentrate (eg., Karo Syrup or other syrup)

Your Regular Veterinarian's phone number

Local emergency clinic's phone number

Poison Control Telephone Number (The National Animal Poison Control Center's number is 1-888-426-4435).