

# What to Do When Your Pet Is Hurt

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

Proper first aid can prevent injuries from worsening, can alleviate pain, or can even save your pet's life. Remember, however, first aid is *preliminary* action only. It can *never* replace professional care by your veterinarian. But, making yourself familiar with basic first aid can help you and your veterinarian better handle emergency situations. Be sure to have the telephone number of a veterinarian readily available (placed with other household emergency numbers).



What kind of situations might warrant first aid? Cuts, exposure to poisons, eye injuries, trauma and heatstroke or cold exposure are just a few of the many types of emergencies that may require first aid at home.

The following takes a brief look at some of the basic do's and don'ts of dealing with an animal requiring first aid. Remember that these are but guidelines and should be used with good judgment and in conjunction with your veterinarian's advice. Be ready to notify the veterinarian that you are on your way with an emergency and describe the nature of the problem so that preparations can be made for your arrival. Preparation can greatly improve the probability of a favorable outcome in the case of an emergency.

Use caution when dealing with an injured animal. In his pain and fright, even a well-loved and trusted pet can become frantic while being handled. Muzzling an injured dog is the quickest and easiest way to prevent yourself from being bitten. Pantyhose, a necktie, or a soft piece of rope about two feet long will make a good muzzle. To give yourself some protection from teeth and claws, cats can be covered with a heavy towel or rug; placed in a pillowcase, box, or pet kennel; and then transported to the veterinarian.

Here's what to do in certain situations:

**External bleeding.** To slow external bleeding, apply a pressure dressing using clean cloth to cover the wound and then bandage it snugly. If swelling occurs below the bandage, loosen or remove it. Please do not apply tourniquets! Tourniquets can potentially cause greater problems than they solve.

**Fractures and dislocations.** These are usually self-evident. The affected limb is held in an unnatural position and the broken bone may actually be visible through the skin. Don't try to apply a splint, since it will most often inflict greater pain. Move the animal as little as possible during transport, and do the transport as soon as possible.

**Shock.** Animals in shock will have pale gums, weakness, and rapid breathing. Keep the animal warm and transport her to the veterinarian as quickly as possible.

**Heatstroke.** Heatstroke causes many of the same signs as shock. You will see rapid, shallow breathing, weakness, and a very high body temperature. Cool the animal as quickly as possible by spraying him with cool (not cold) water or wrapping him in cool, moist towels. Because of the many problems caused by an elevated body temperature, seek professional help immediately.

Remember, to prevent heatstroke, never leave an animal in a parked vehicle during hot weather. Many people think their dog will be okay if they leave the windows open, but even with the windows wide open, the car can quickly become hot enough to cause heatstroke, brain damage, and even death. Your pet may pay dearly for even a few minutes spent in a sweltering car.

**Exposure to poison.** If you think your pet has been exposed to a poison, contact your veterinarian immediately. If detected soon enough, many poisons can be eliminated from the animal without need for extensive, expensive treatment. It's important to bring the label of the suspected poison to your veterinarian so the correct treatment can be given. Some poisons may take a period of time before their effects become evident, so act quickly if you think poison ingestion is a possibility.

You should be especially careful about antifreeze, which often leaks from cars into parking lots and puddles. Check the floor of your garage, too, for any telltale signs. Antifreeze is attractive to pets because it tastes sweet, but most brands are very poisonous and even a few licks can be fatal. If your pet ingests even a small amount of antifreeze, contact your veterinarian immediately. Pet-safe antifreeze (which tastes bad) is now available, so consider buying it for your car in the future.

For any emergency involving your pet, follow these steps:

- Be prepared.
- Stay calm and act responsibly.
- Call your veterinarian!

Remember, your pet's depending on you!

*Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends' chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie's Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.*