

The Ins and Outs of Surgery

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

Every day, hundreds of pets undergo surgery – surgery of all different types and for a variety of different reasons. Some surgeries are elective surgeries, that is, they are planned ahead of time (such as a spay, neuter or tumor removal). Other surgeries are non-elective or unplanned. These surgeries are usually emergencies, such as the need to control internal bleeding, repair a broken bone or laceration, or relieve an intestinal blockage.



Regardless of the type of surgery or the reason for or timing of the surgery, what happens just before and just after that surgery is basically the same. Even though a lot of you have probably had surgery yourselves, you may not know exactly what goes on when your pet has surgery. Surprisingly, what does go on for your pet's surgery is remarkably similar to what goes on for your surgery!

Why must I withhold food and water prior to surgery?

If your pet is scheduled for surgery, you are told to withhold food and water the night before and the morning of the surgery day. The reason for this is that the anesthetic medications used during the surgery can upset the stomach, and your pet may vomit if there is food or water in the stomach. Vomiting can be very dangerous in an animal who is unconscious. The vomit can be breathed into the lungs, causing, at the least, a very serious pneumonia and, at the worst, death. So, it is important to inform the medical personnel if your pet has accidentally gotten into any food or water prior to surgery. The surgery may need to be rescheduled for another day.

What happens before surgery?

Once your pet has been admitted to the hospital, a weight and temperature are taken, and the veterinarian performs a physical examination. Older pets may need blood tests to evaluate organ function prior to administering anesthesia. Although anesthesia is considered to be very safe, there is still a risk for problems. That is why every precaution is taken to ensure that your pet is healthy prior to administering anesthesia. When everything has checked out okay, a pre-anesthetic injection is prepared according to your pet's weight. This injection is a combination of a sedative and a strong, long-acting pain reliever so your pet will feel no pain from the surgery after awakening. An I.V. catheter is placed in the front leg so that fluids or other medications can be given if needed during surgery.

What happens during surgery?

When your pet is sleeping, a tube is inserted into the trachea (windpipe), and gas anesthesia is administered to keep your pet completely unconscious during the surgical

procedure. Your pet's vital signs (heart rate and breathing) are monitored continually throughout the entire surgery.

What happens after surgery?

When the surgery is completed, your pet is taken to a recovery area and monitored continuously until he or she is awake. The waking-up process usually takes about 10 to 15 minutes; full recovery takes about one to two hours. Since pain medication was given prior to surgery, your pet isn't feeling any discomfort during this time.

When your pet goes home, special instructions will be given to you, depending upon the type of surgery, and a follow-up appointment will be scheduled if needed. Most pets recover quickly following surgery and are up and about the very next day. If you have any questions or concerns, always be sure to call your veterinarian right away.

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.