

FIRST AID FOR PETS

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS

Once our Westie, Cole, hit her senior years, she adopted YOLO (“you only live once”) as a life philosophy, especially when it came to forbidden foods. One day, she YOLO’d a chocolatey brownie—right off my kid’s plate. Thanks to step-by-step instructions from the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center, we were able to safely resolve the situation and monitor Cole’s reaction at home.

Not all situations are an easy fix, of course. If your pet experiences a medical emergency (such as a seizure or heatstroke) or is injured by a vehicle, you should get them to your veterinarian or an emergency vet as quickly as possible.

“First aid for pets is never a substitute for veterinary care,” says Dr. Bridget Lyons, a board-certified emergency and critical care veterinarian and service head of emergency and critical care at Cornell University Veterinary Specialists. “Without evaluation by medical professionals, injuries can become worse and more difficult to treat.”

That said, when unexpected injuries do happen, there are some things that pet parents can do, both before and during transport to a veterinary hospital. In addition, you can take steps to make sure you know what to do in case of a medical emergency.

BE PREPARED

Some preparation *before* an emergency hits will help you stay calm and save



- Styptic powder
- Rectal thermometer and petroleum jelly
- Muzzle
- Any over-the-counter medications or other items your vet recommends

POTENTIAL SCENARIOS

Although you should of course always contact your veterinarian (or an emergency veterinarian or pet poison control line), in some potential scenarios you may want to first try to provide first aid to your pet—for instance, if it could help stabilize them or if the situation isn’t urgent.

Just make sure you call your veterinarian to help you determine next steps.

time in a crisis:

- Preprogram your veterinarian’s and local veterinary emergency clinic’s addresses into your GPS or navigation program.
- Set the phone numbers for your vet, the emergency clinic, and animal poison control helplines as cell phone contacts.
- Save copies of your pet’s medical records somewhere you can access them quickly, such as on your phone.

Keep hard copies of all the above info in a basic first aid kit, which should also include:

- Self-stick gauze rolls and bandages
- Waterproof tape
- Tweezers
- Scissors
- Instant cold pack
- Saline
- 3% hydrogen peroxide

Choking

All choking pets should see a veterinarian as soon as possible. But if your pet’s in distress or their tongue or gums turn blue, you can try to dislodge the object yourself, ideally while on the way to the veterinarian, if another person is driving. Follow these steps, using caution so you don’t push the object deeper or cause your pet to panic and bite you:

1. Cover the top of your pet’s muzzle with your hand (without blocking their nostrils).
2. Lift the top of their muzzle to open their mouth.
3. Try to carefully pull out the object (if you can see it) using tweezers or needle-nosed pliers.

If that doesn’t work...

4. Set your pet on their side.
5. With your hands at the bottom of their ribcage, apply rapid, firm

thrusts downward and slightly forward (toward your pet's head).

Poisoning

If you suspect your dog ingested something they shouldn't have, contact the **ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center** at 888-426-4435 or **Pet Poison Helpline** at 855-764-7661. For a fee, they may be able to walk you through the steps for safely inducing vomiting at home* or advise you to see a veterinarian immediately. Cats always need a veterinarian to administer medications that will make them vomit.

Heatstroke

When pets overheat, they can quickly develop heatstroke, a life-threatening condition in which body temperature is dangerously elevated. If you notice your pet breathing loudly, panting heavily, acting disoriented, vomiting, or collapsing, you'll need to get them to a veterinary hospital immediately to prevent organ damage, coma, and death. Call your veterinarian or an emergency vet as soon as you notice any of these signs to alert them to your pet's condition; they may direct you to help lower your pet's temperature a bit first by placing them in a cool bath (never cold or containing ice!) or spraying them with a garden hose.

Bleeding, Bites, and Punctures

Torn toenails are a common cause of bleeding that pet parents may be able to treat at home. You can try putting styptic powder (or corn starch or flour) on the nail. If the bleeding stops, you can probably skip the trip to the veterinarian.

For any bite or puncture, always see a veterinarian. "It could really be tip of the iceberg, where there's just a small wound on the surface and it could result in [a] significant tear injury underneath," says Dr. Justine A. Lee, a board-certified veterinary specialist in

*Only induce vomiting if instructed to do so by a veterinarian.

both emergency/critical care and toxicology, author of *It's a Dog's Life... but It's Your Carpet* and *It's a Cat's World...You Just Live in It*, and host of the ER Vet podcast. Infection is also always a concern. You can quickly rinse the wound with saline, then cover it with sterile gauze, applying pressure while transporting your pet to the veterinary clinic.

Vehicle Trauma

"Trauma should never be managed at home," Dr. Lee says. Even if there's no obvious external injury, your pet could have internal bleeding or other damage, so always seek veterinary care immediately.

The most important thing you can do if a vehicle strikes your pet is safely transport them to the hospital. "Even the nicest dog can bite from pain. A muzzle or even a long piece of cloth (tied gently around the nose) can be used to protect everyone while you're moving your dog. Using a big blanket [to transfer] them onto a backboard or a piece of plywood can be extremely helpful," Dr. Lee says. "Once you are on the way to the veterinary clinic, call to prepare them that you are on the way with an emergency."

Collapse, Fainting, and Seizures

Dr. Lyons says, "Any pet [who] has collapsed or fainted should be brought to the closest veterinarian immediately. Pets may faint because of problems with the heart or brain, and any collapse event should be taken very seriously."

In the case of a seizure, keep your pet calm during the episode, and remove any objects they could bump into. Do not restrain them. Record the length of the seizure, then get them to a veterinarian.

RESOURCES FOR PET PARENTS

There's a lot to know about pet first aid. Fortunately, though, pet parents don't have to go it alone. You can take a

class in pet first aid, or brush up on first aid through websites, YouTube videos, and/or books. You might even consider getting certified in pet cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Ask if your veterinarian provides a first aid course or can recommend a local class.

"Taking a pet CPR course will give you the knowledge and courage to act quickly when the seconds matter. We hope that you will never need to use these skills, but you do want to know what to do while help arrives, should you find yourself in the ultimate emergency situation," says Kenichiro Yagi, a certified veterinary technician specialist in emergency and critical care and chief veterinary nursing officer at Veterinary Emergency Group, of his involvement with the Reassessment Campaign on Veterinary Resuscitation (RECOVER) Initiative. The RECOVER Initiative strives to standardize CPR training for pet parents as well as veterinary professionals.

"When your pet suffers from cardiopulmonary arrest, performing CPR is the only real chance to help," Kenichiro explains. "Knowing how to recognize when the pet's heart has stopped, calling for help, and immediately starting appropriate chest compressions and delivering breaths is crucial to give the pet a chance at survival. While I absolutely want your pet to receive professional veterinary care as soon as possible, in this situation, the pet being left without blood circulation and oxygen while waiting for help or during transport will lead to irreversible damage."

Visit recoverinitiative.org to learn more about the RECOVER pet CPR course.

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