

Prepare to Save Your Pet's Life

by Lyn T. Garson, CVT

What do corn syrup and hydrogen peroxide have in common? They each can be used to save an animal's life. How about Tylenol®, insecticides, avocado, and grapes? These are toxic to animals and can cause serious and/or life-threatening illness. With advanced planning and a few basic supplies you can help save your pet's life in an emergency.

Advanced Planning

Emergencies due to injury, sudden illness, or accidental poisoning can happen at any time, even to pets who receive the best care. Taking time to plan in advance will go a long way toward increasing your pet's chances of making a full recovery should the unexpected occur.

Create an emergency contact information sheet and keep it handy both at home, and in your car while traveling. List nearby animal control agencies, veterinary hospitals, boarding facilities, pet-friendly lodging, and the contact number for the 24-hour National ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center (888-426-4435). Not all veterinary hospitals are open for "after-hours" visits, so be sure to include contact information for specialty emergency hospitals and make note of their scheduling and payment policies. Create a similar list for the areas you vacation with your pet.

Secure Your Pet's Safety

Trendy designer bags and pet strollers are stylish, however pets are better protected in a sturdy plastic carrier with a top-loading feature. A frightened cat or dog can easily bite or claw their way out of cardboard carriers and may rip through nylon mesh doors and windows on soft-sided carriers. Make a habit of checking and tightening all carrier screws, knobs and door latches when transporting your pets. Ideally, each pet should have their own carrier. In the event of an evacuation, your pets may need to be transported and remain in a carrier for an extended period. Always secure carriers on the floor in vehicles and never where airbag mechanisms are located.

Choose break-a-way type collars for cats; if leash walking a cat use a harness instead. Ensure dog collars are snug to prevent your pet from slipping out. Two fingers' spacing between your pet and the collar allows a good fit while not being too tight.

Dogs may love the wind in their face while riding in the car, however they can be injured by flying debris or can slip out of partially opened windows. The back of a pickup truck is an extremely dangerous place for your dog. Even if securely tethered, they can be injured or strangled. Never leave your pet inside a parked car – temperatures can reach life-threatening levels quickly even with the windows cracked open.

Household Hazards

Beware of everyday items in your home that can become a hazard or poisonous to your pet: plastic bags (including potato chip/snack bags) dental floss, string, needle and thread, fish hooks, window blind cords, electrical cords, coins, certain plants, foods such as avocado, grapes/raisins, chocolate, insecticides, and fabric softener sheets. Keep washer and dryer doors closed when not in use to prevent accidental entrapment. Check for gates or doors inadvertently left open, especially after workers have been at your home.

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True Emergency or False Alarm?

Dr. Polly Fleckenstein, veterinarian at the Veterinary Medical Center of Central New York, a 24-hour emergency and critical care facility, reports the most frequent emergency problems presented are vomiting and/or diarrhea. "These symptoms have a huge variety of causes," says Dr. Fleckenstein, "from puppies with parvovirus or parasites, to dietary indiscretion, ingested foreign bodies (usually a toy), metabolic causes and cancer."

Waiting too long to seek emergency treatment may worsen a medical problem, or result in dire consequences. How can a concerned pet owner know the difference between a true emergency and false alarm? Dr. Fleckenstein feels strongly that pet owners know their family members best-- if they think something is wrong it should be checked. "Sometimes the value of someone saying it's nothing to worry about is worth the time and effort in going in for an emergency," she says. "And sometimes we do bloodwork and x-rays and find that the pet owner truly had a right to be concerned."

Some injuries or illnesses should never wait. Seek immediate treatment if your pet experiences any of the following:

- Traumatic injury or fall – even if pet appears fine there may be internal injuries
- Allergic reactions
- Gastric dilation/torsion (bloat) – most common in large-breed dogs
- Seizures
- Difficulty breathing
- Repeated vomiting and/or diarrhea
- Heat stroke (hyperthermia)
- Hypothermia
- Poisoning
- Male cat straining to urinate, or not urinating
- Overweight cat who suddenly stops eating

Always consult your veterinarian if you have any question regarding your pet's health.

Helping or Hurting?

Pet owners with the best intentions to help their pet may inadvertently wind up causing harm instead. Reaching in the medicine cabinet for over-the-counter remedies, especially non-steroidal anti-inflammatories such as aspirin, Ibuprofen, or Tylenol® (acetaminophen) can be deadly to our pets and should never be given unless specifically prescribed by a veterinarian. "Animals are not people, and cannot metabolize the drugs that we use the same way – they can be toxic," warns Dr. Fleckenstein.

Pets can chew through containers and packaging. Store all medications completely out of reach to curious pets. In addition, be aware when taking your own medications, to prevent your pet from ingesting a dropped pill.

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Caution must be exercised even when using products specifically designed for animals. Always read labels carefully for proper application and dosage. A common emergency Dr. Fleckenstein sees in cats is poisoning from flea control products labeled for use only on dogs. She advises pet owners to avoid over-the-counter or Internet source products. "These can cause tremors, seizures and death in cats while you had the good intention of getting rid of the fleas," said Dr. Fleckenstein, "and some cats, or dogs, can have reactions even to the products labeled for them. Get what your veterinarian recommends!" She also warns against relying on Internet advice, which may be misleading.

First Aid to the Rescue

Know your pets' normal behavior patterns, which can provide clues for when they aren't feeling well. Note any increase/decrease in appetite and thirst or urination and monitor their weight. While petting or brushing your pet, take the opportunity to look in their ears and feel their entire body, legs and paws. Check for abnormalities such as lumps, swelling, bruises, embedded ticks or other evidence of parasites.

Read about basic pet first-aid, sign up for a course, or ask your veterinarian or veterinary technician to show you what to do in an emergency. Learn how to check your pet's vital signs. Prepare for emergencies by assembling a kit of first-aid supplies (see side bar) to include a new unopened bottle of both hydrogen peroxide and Karo® syrup. Peroxide can be used to induce vomiting under certain circumstances. Karo® syrup is used for hypoglycemia (low blood sugar). It is imperative to always consult a veterinary professional before administering either of these, but having them on hand can be lifesaving.

Accidents can happen but through proper planning, keeping pets under supervision whenever possible and pet-proofing your home you can avoid many emergencies.

Tips for Your First Aid, Rescue and Evacuation Kits

Prepare not only for weather-related disasters such as hurricanes or floods, but also for the unexpected everyday situation. A family member could become ill requiring you to leave your pets on a moment's notice, or a storm could hit while you are away preventing you from returning home to care for your pet.

- Take your pets with you if evacuated.
- Have a back-up plan if you are unable to care for your pets during an emergency.
- Keep a contact information sheet handy (at home and in your car while traveling).

Animal Evacuation Supply Kit

- Food packed in waterproof container – at least a three-day supply.
- Water – at least a three-day supply.
- Veterinarian-prescribed medications.
- Medical records, including vaccine certificates.

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- Collar/harness with ID tag and leash.
- Microchip identification number.
- Crate/pet carriers – plastic or metal carriers only (cardboard carriers fall apart easily, especially when wet) be sure to label carriers with your name and your pet's name.
- Sanitation supplies.
- Recent close-up photo of you with your pet.

Animal Rescue Kit

- Keep one kit at home in case a neighbor needs to rescue your pets while you are away and keep another kit in your car.
- Pillowcases – to use as a quick capture and/or transport device in place of a cat carrier (some will be less frightened of this than a carrier).
- Towels and blankets – can be used to cover the animals to calm or distract them; can also be used to wrap an injured animal for comfort or warmth.
- Leash and /or rope to loop like a lasso.
- Heavy gloves – to prevent a scared animal from biting you.
- Muzzles – when frightened, animals may strike out at people they know and trust.
- Carriers
- Treats

Animal First Aid Kit

- Gauze pads and gauze rolls
- White bandaging tape 1" wide
- Flexible bandage tape 3" wide
- Bandage scissors
- Wound cleansing solution
- Alcohol pads
- Cotton-tipped applicators
- Latex-free protective gloves
- Liquid dish detergent
- Towel and washcloth
- Tweezers
- Sterile saline solutions
- Hydrogen peroxide – new unopened bottle

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- Karo® syrup – new unopened bottle
- Nail clippers
- Styptic powder
- Foil blanket
- Cold/warm packs
- Rectal thermometer and lubricant
- First-aid guidebook