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CANINE EMERGENCIES

Medical emergencies occur suddenly and without warning. It is important for all pet owners to have a basic understanding of common veterinary medical emergencies and basic first aid for their pet.

Some emergencies are obvious. A dog runs across the road and is hit by a car. Others may be just as serious – but not as obvious. A German shepherd appears restless after a large meal and tries to vomit. Unknown to the owner, this is the beginning of Gastric Dilatation-Volvulus (GDV), one of the most serious medical emergencies in large breeds.

While no one can be prepared for all emergencies, there are some simple guidelines and clinical signs that all pet owners can follow and look for to help their pet loved ones. Who knows, it just may save your pet's life.

Are there any common emergencies that I should be prepared to handle?

Listed below is a list of common emergency situations with a brief description of their clinical signs. This list is not intended to be comprehensive but should serve as a general guide. In any medical emergency or illness, be sure to contact your veterinarian or the closest emergency clinic as soon as possible for more specific recommendations and assistance.



Anaphylaxis – This is a severe allergic reaction or acute hypersensitivity reaction and is often recognized by sudden collapse and severe breathing difficulties. The first clinical signs are often swelling around the face or muzzle, the appearance of wheals or hives on the skin, vomiting or diarrhea, and restlessness. There are many causes for anaphylaxis that vary from insect stings, contact allergies to injection reactions. You should seek veterinary care immediately if you think your pet may be experiencing anaphylaxis.

Bites and fight wounds – These are particularly serious if:

There is a large volume of blood loss or the bleeding is persistent and direct pressure fails to stop the bleeding

1. Wounds involve the head, especially the eyes, ears, nose or throat
2. Injuries have penetrated internal organs or the abdomen, stomach or groin

Bleeding – When is bleeding a medical emergency? When is it severe or life-threatening? Blood pumping out or dripping so fast that it is making a pool on the floor or blood soaking through a normal bandage within a very few minutes is cause for alarm. Ears, feet, torn nails, the tongue and the nose can bleed severely and need veterinary attention to stop the loss of blood as quickly as possible.

Burns and scalds – Unless you witness these injuries, they are not frequently apparent until later when scabs or loss of hair or skin are noted. This is because the initial burns are usually masked by the dog's fur. If you see your pet burned or scalded, contact your veterinarian immediately.

Persistent vomiting or diarrhea – Repeated or continuous vomiting or diarrhea, with or without blood, could be a sign of poisoning, obstruction or acute gastrointestinal infection. Dehydration is a major concern, especially in small dogs. Contact your veterinarian as soon as possible and before administering human medications or forcing it to drink or eat. You may inadvertently give something that worsens your pet's condition.

Convulsions or seizures – A convulsion or seizure is a series of violent, uncontrolled spasms. Seizures lasting for more than five minutes or accompanied by defecation or urination are considered serious and medical attention should be sought immediately. Any pet that experiences a seizure needs to be seen by their veterinarian.

Eclampsia – Eclampsia is also known as hypocalcemia, milk fever, or puerperal tetany. It is a condition that not only affects nursing mothers but may also occur during the later stages of pregnancy. Signs are vague and include restlessness, panting, increased salivation and stiffness when moving. This can rapidly progress to muscle twitching and spasms, pyrexia (high fever) and sudden death. Contact your veterinarian immediately if you are concerned that your pet is developing eclampsia.

Hemorrhagic gastroenteritis – This condition is characterized by severe bloody diarrhea and vomiting. There are many causes of hemorrhagic enteritis ranging from a change in diet to stress to intestinal obstruction. Contact your veterinarian if you observe blood in the stool, if the vomiting or diarrhea persists beyond six to twelve hours or if your pet becomes less responsive or weak.

Heart failure – Also called “heart attack”, cardiac failure, and cardiac insufficiency. How do you recognize if your pet is experiencing heart failure?



As dogs age, they may suffer from a condition called congestive heart failure (CHF) which may affect either the left, the right or both sides of the heart. The condition is often undiagnosed until coughing or sudden collapse occurs. Signs of heart failure include coughing (especially at night), difficulty breathing, bluish discoloration of the tongue (and other mucous membranes), decreased stamina and exercise intolerance.

A “heart attack” – or when the dog collapses – is often preceded by exercise or excitement. The inefficient heart is unable to pump blood fast enough and there is a severe lack of oxygen to the muscles and brain, which results in sudden collapse. If you observe any of these signs, contact your veterinarian immediately.

Heat stroke – This can happen at any time in warm, humid weather. It is frequently the result of leaving dogs in cars in hot weather with too little ventilation. The signs are excessive panting, lethargy and distress. Unconsciousness and death can quickly follow.

Injuries – When do injuries become a medical emergency? This will be determined by the type and extent of wounds and may be difficult to tell without medical tests. Any penetrating wound to the chest or abdomen and virtually any injury involving the eye should be regarded as a medical emergency. Injuries to the head or those causing difficulty breathing should also be treated as immediate emergencies.

Poisoning – Poisoning of any sort is an emergency. If you see your dog ingest a suspicious substance, call your veterinarian or local emergency clinic. Most poisonings or contact with toxic materials occurs without your knowledge. Clinical signs are variable and include excessive salivation, vomiting, diarrhea, collapse, skin damage due to caustic substances, etc. Seek veterinary care as soon as possible to help reduce the absorption of toxins. If possible, bring the container or label of the substance your pet has ingested. Some common household items that are poisonous to your pet include chocolate, grapes, raisins, sugarless gums and candies which contain xylitol, macadamia nuts, green potatoes and fermenting mulch.

Unconsciousness or collapse – This may occur with or without seizure activity. It often occurs without warning, such as in the case of sudden heart failure or following a blow to the head. Collapse should always be treated as a medical emergency.

What should I do in an emergency?

1. Keep calm and try not to panic. By staying calm, you will be able to answer any questions from your veterinarian and help your pet.
2. Contact your veterinarian or local emergency clinic. Explain what has happened and follow the advice given. Keep your dog warm and as quiet as possible.
3. Keep your pet as still as possible when moving to reduce the risk of further injury to limbs or spine.
4. Carry out any procedures and first aid advised by your veterinarian.
5. Transport your dog safely to the veterinarian as directed.