

Emergencies in Dogs

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Pet medical emergencies can 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 dogs. For details on how to perform rescue breathing and canine CPR, see the separate handout, "First Aid for Dogs".

Some emergencies are obvious, such as a dog that runs across the road and is hit by a car. Others may be just as serious, but not as obvious. For example, a German Shepherd appears restless after a large meal and tries to vomit; unknown to the owner, this is the beginning of **gastric dilatation and volvulus** (GDV), one of the most serious medical emergencies in dogs (explained later in this handout). While no one can be prepared for all emergencies, there are some simple steps you should follow

and signs to look for if your dog is ill or involved in an accident. Knowing this basic information could save your pet's life.

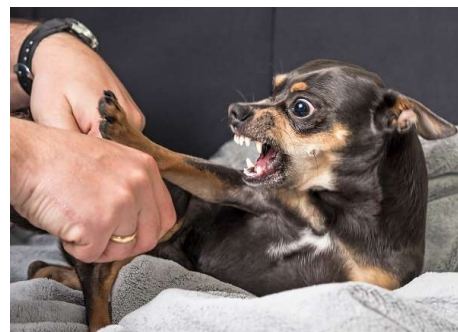
What should I do in an emergency?

1. Keep calm and try not to panic. Assess the scene for any additional threats to you or your pet. This is important for everyone's safety.
2. Keep your dog warm (except in the case of heatstroke) and as still and quiet as possible with minimal movement, especially if there are signs of nervous system injury, broken bones, or any chance of a spinal injury.
3. Contact your veterinarian. Explain what has happened and follow the specific advice given.
4. To safely move or transport an injured dog, get somebody to help you. For a small dog, put him into a carrier (remove the top for easy and safe access to the carrier; **DO NOT** push an injured dog through the small door or opening), or use a suitable container such as a strong cardboard box. For a larger dog, use a makeshift stretcher made out of some rigid material such as an appropriate-sized, sturdy piece of wood. Carefully maneuver the dog onto a blanket or coat so that it can be gently moved to the carrier, box, or stretcher.
5. Transport your dog to your veterinarian as soon as possible.

Are there any restraint tips that might be useful?

The majority of animals in an emergency situation will be panicked, disoriented, or injured. The stress of an emergency can cause an otherwise friendly dog to behave aggressively. Although most panicky dogs respond to a calm, soothing voice, it is important to maintain your personal safety by using caution when approaching or touching an injured dog.

In some cases, a muzzle may be appropriate. You can create a muzzle out of a leash, belt, rope, or pair of pantyhose. Make a loop in the cord and lasso it around the muzzle of the dog, tightening it to prevent the animal from biting. Dogs have only one muscle to open their jaw so once the jaw is closed, it is relatively easy to hold it safely shut. Dogs can breathe normally through their nostrils unless their nose is injured or obstructed.



Wrap the dog snugly in a blanket to minimize movement during transportation. Be very careful when wrapping a dog if there is a possibility of broken bones or spinal injury. If you suspect a spinal injury or broken bone, lay the dog on a board and immobilize it with straps, cords, or even duct tape straps over a blanket (do not adhere the tape to its skin). Pay special attention to immobilizing the head and neck.

What common emergencies should I be prepared to handle?

Below is a list of common emergencies with brief descriptions of their clinical signs and level of severity. This list is not intended to be comprehensive but rather to serve as a general guide. In any medical emergency or illness, be sure to contact your veterinarian as soon as possible for more specific recommendations and assistance.

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Acute hemorrhagic diarrhea syndrome. This condition is characterized by severe bloody diarrhea and vomiting, along with weakness or collapse. This condition is serious and requires immediate veterinary attention.

Anaphylaxis or anaphylactic shock. This is a severe allergic reaction characterized by sudden collapse and severe breathing difficulties. The first clinical signs are often swelling around the face or muzzle, the appearance of bumps or hives on the skin, vomiting or diarrhea, and restlessness. These clinical signs can quickly progress to collapse and breathing difficulty. Left untreated, severe anaphylactic shock can result in death. There are many causes for anaphylaxis that vary from insect stings and contact allergies to injection reactions. Seek veterinary care immediately if you think your pet may be experiencing anaphylaxis.

Automobile injury. Although you should make sure your dog has a clear airway, **do not put your hand in the mouth of a conscious (awake) dog.** Cover open wounds with whatever clean material is available. Move your dog with care, supporting its body as much as possible, using a blanket or makeshift stretcher if at all possible. Immediately take your dog to a veterinary hospital.

Bite and fight wounds. These are particularly serious and require immediate veterinary intervention if:

- a lot of blood has been lost or if bleeding is persistent and direct pressure fails to stop it
- wounds involve the head, especially the eyes, ears, nose, or throat
- there are penetrating injuries in the region of the chest, abdomen, or groin.

Bleeding. It can sometimes be difficult for pet owners to know when bleeding represents a veterinary emergency and when it can be treated at home. Blood pumping out in spurts or dripping so fast that it quickly makes a pool on the floor or soaks through a bandage within a few minutes is cause for alarm. The ears, feet, toenails, tongue, and nose can bleed severely and may need veterinary attention to stop the loss of

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Bloat/gastric dilatation and volvulus. A dog that is experiencing an episode of 'bloat' or gastric dilatation will develop a bulge behind the rib cage from a distended stomach full of gas. In some cases, the distended stomach will twist upon itself, causing a volvulus (where a loop of intestine is twisted around itself and the mesentery that supports it), which will obstruct the entrance and exit of the stomach. Swelling of the abdomen becomes very pronounced and the dog will rapidly collapse due to shock. In its early stages, the dog may show repeated, unsuccessful attempts to vomit. **This is a serious emergency situation that requires immediate veterinary attention if the dog is to survive.** See the handout "Bloat: Gastric Dilatation and Volvulus in Dogs" for more information.

Difficulty Breathing. If your pet is having difficulty breathing, especially if the breathing is labored, seek veterinary care as soon as possible (also see the handout "First Aid for Dogs" for CPR instructions). **BE VERY CAREFUL!** Dogs that are having difficulty breathing are prone to panic and even the friendliest dog may bite. Never put your fingers in the mouth of a choking dog.

Burns. Burns can be caused by heat or by caustic substances such as acids or alkaline. Unless you witness these injuries, they may initially go unnoticed until a scab or an area of skin or hair loss is discovered. If you see your pet get burned or scalded, cool the burned area by running cool water over the burn or covering it with a cold wet towel. If a caustic substance caused the burn, rinse with cool water for 15 minutes to remove or dilute the caustic material and soothe the pain. If skin loss is noticed, protect the area with the cleanest material available. In all cases, contact your veterinarian immediately.

Convulsions or seizures. A seizure is a series of violent, uncontrolled spasms. Most seizures last for less than two minutes. If a seizure lasts more than five minutes or if several seizures occur in rapid succession, your dog will require immediate veterinary treatment to prevent permanent damage. During a seizure, **DO NOT** put your hand in your dog's mouth. The dog will not swallow its tongue. You can protect the dog from injuring itself, but do not attempt to interrupt the seizure. Once your dog has recovered from the seizure, provide reassurance by talking calmly or petting it. Your dog will often be disoriented for a short time after a seizure. Your dog will require veterinary attention to determine the cause of the seizures, but as long as the seizure was not prolonged, you can book the appointment at your earliest convenience.

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Persistent diarrhea and/or vomiting. Repeated or continuous vomiting or diarrhea, with or without blood, could be a sign of poisoning, an intestinal obstruction, or acute gastrointestinal infection. Dehydration is a major concern, especially in small dogs. Contact your veterinarian if you observe blood in the stool, if the vomiting or diarrhea persists beyond 6-12 hours, or if your pet becomes less responsive or weak. Abdominal distension and repeated, unproductive attempts at vomiting are often an early indication of gastric dilatation and volvulus (see handout "Bloat: Gastric Dilatation and Volvulus in Dogs" for more information). If you notice your dog repeatedly trying to vomit, **DO NOT WAIT** and get to the veterinary hospital immediately. Do not administer any human medications unless advised by your veterinarian. Do not force your dog to drink or eat. You may inadvertently give something that worsens your dog's condition.

Eclampsia. Eclampsia is also known as **hypocalcemia** (low blood calcium level) or milk fever. It is a condition that affects nursing mothers, especially if a litter is large. It is caused by the depletion of calcium in the bloodstream from heavy milk production. In some cases, eclampsia may occur during the later stages of pregnancy. The signs are subtle and include restlessness, panting, increased salivation, and stiffness when moving. These signs can rapidly progress to muscle twitching and spasms, convulsions, **pyrexia** (high fever), and sudden death. Contact

Eye injury. Many eye injuries can cause blindness or a ruptured eye if left untreated. A scratched or punctured cornea is very painful. To prevent further damage, do not allow your dog to rub its head on the carpet or scratch the eye. If a blow to the head causes the eyeball to come out of its socket, keep it moist with saline solution (ie., contact lens rinsing solution that is saline only) and protect it from direct injury. Sudden blindness or vision loss (your dog may start stumbling or bumping into things, or you might notice widely dilated pupils) may be a symptom of **glaucoma** (increased pressure within the eye). If your dog develops any of these signs, seek immediate veterinary treatment.

Heatstroke. This can happen at any time in hot or humid weather. It is frequently the result of leaving a dog in a parked car during warm weather. The signs are excessive panting, lethargy, and distress. Unconsciousness and death can quickly follow. If heatstroke occurs, cool your dog as soon as possible by immersing it in a tub of cool water if he is small enough, by hosing him down with a garden hose if he is larger, or by applying cold wet towels to his body and legs. Avoid using ice or ice water because this may drop the temperature too quickly and cause additional complications. Dogs that have been exposed to heat or smoke from a fire should be offered water as soon as they are stable. Take the dog to a veterinary hospital immediately (keep the car windows open during the trip) to ensure that there are no other problems.

Heart failure. Also called heart attack, cardiac failure, and cardiac insufficiency, heart failure may go undiagnosed until the dog suddenly collapses or faints. As dogs age, they may develop **congestive heart failure** (CHF) which may affect either the left, the right, or both sides of the heart. Signs of impending heart failure include coughing (especially at night), difficulty breathing, bluish discoloration of the tongue (and other mucous membranes), decreased stamina, and exercise intolerance or inability to exercise for as long as they used to. Exercise or excitement often immediately precedes the collapse. With the increased demand from the excitement, the inefficient heart is unable to pump blood fast enough, causing 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.

Other injuries. Some injuries are medical emergencies, depending on the type and extent of the wounds. If you suspect that your dog has a broken bone, immobilize the area and use a board or other support during transportation to your veterinarian. 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 urgent emergencies.

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Poisoning. Poisoning of any sort is an emergency. If you see your dog ingest a suspicious substance, call your veterinarian right away. Many different things in the house and garden are potentially toxic to dogs, including pesticides, chemicals, cleaners, and medications. Most poisonings occur without your knowledge. Clinical signs are variable and include excessive salivation, vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, collapse, or skin damage due to caustic substances. If a product label is available, check it for first aid instructions. Seek veterinary care as soon as possible to help reduce the absorption of toxins. Bring a sample of the suspected toxin with you, as well as any packaging. **DO NOT INDUCE VOMITING UNLESS SPECIFICALLY DIRECTED TO DO SO BY YOUR VETERINARIAN.**

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 is shock?

Shock has many definitions. It is a complex systemic or whole-body reaction to a number of situations, including acute loss of blood volume such as hemorrhage, heart failure, and other causes of decreased circulation (e.g., severe and sudden allergic reaction and heat stroke). If not treated quickly and effectively, systemic shock may cause irreversible injury to body cells, and it can be fatal.

Signs of shock include rapid breathing that may be noisy, rapid heart rate with a weak pulse, pale (possibly even white) mucous membranes (gums, lips, under eyelids), severe depression (listlessness), and cool extremities (limbs and ears). The dog may vomit.

Shock requires immediate emergency treatment. After being involved in an emergency or accident, it is important that you take your dog for a veterinary examination as soon as possible, even if he appears to have fully recovered.

Is there anything else I should know about emergencies?

Emergencies are always unexpected and that is why it is important to establish a relationship with a veterinary clinic before they happen. This allows your veterinary health care team to provide streamlined care by already being familiar with your dog and having his medical history on file.



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