

First Aid in Cats

Medical emergencies occur suddenly and without warning. It is important for all cat owners to have a basic understanding of common veterinary medical emergencies and basic first aid for their pet. While no one can be prepared for all emergencies, there are some simple guidelines you should follow and things to look for if your cat seems ill or involved in an accident. Who knows, it just may save your cat's life.

"For a general overview of what constitutes an emergency, and how to handle common crisis situations, refer to our fact sheet on [Emergencies in Cats](#)."

What is first aid?

First aid is initial treatment given in a medical emergency. Its purpose is:

- To preserve life
- To reduce pain and discomfort
- To minimize any risk of permanent disability or disfigurement

In an emergency, what should I do first?

1. Keep calm and assess the scene for any additional threats to you or your pet. This is important for everyone's safety.
2. Keep your cat warm, as quiet as possible, and keep movement to a minimum, especially if there is possible trauma, broken limbs, or any neurological symptoms.
3. Contact your veterinary hospital, inform them of the situation and get specific first aid advice.
4. To safely move or transport an injured cat, use suitable container such as a strong cardboard box or a cat carrier (remove the top for easy and safe access to the carrier; don't push an injured cat through the small door or opening). Drop a blanket or thick towel over the patient. Tuck it in carefully or maneuver the cat onto the blanket so it can be gently placed in the container. The blanket will help stabilize the neck and spine and prevent inadvertent clawing or scratching from the injured pet.
5. Get to the veterinary hospital as soon as possible, but drive carefully.

Are there any restraint tips that might be useful?

"An otherwise friendly animal to act aggressively."

The majority of animals you will encounter will be panicked, disoriented, or injured. The stress of an emergency involving a pet or owner can cause an otherwise friendly animal to act aggressively. Although most panicky animals respond to a calm, soothing voice and stroking of the head or shoulders, use caution when approaching or touching any injured animal.

"Muzzles can be difficult to put onto a cat."

1. **Muzzles** can be difficult to put onto a cat, due to the shape of most cats' faces. There are specific muzzles designed for use in cats, but they are rarely handy when an emergency strikes. For some cats, it may be possible to loop an improvised muzzle made from a piece of rope or a pair of pantyhose around the cat's head to prevent it from biting. If you can safely get the jaw closed, it is relatively easy to keep it closed because cats only have one muscle to open their jaw. If not, you can drape a towel over the cat's head to provide some measure of protection.

2. You can **wrap the body** of a frightened or unmanageable cat in a blanket, a small bag or purse, or towel. Do not constrict the trachea or airway. If possible, leave the head exposed, but if the cat is very aggressive, it will be safer to put the entire cat in the bag. **NEVER** put a cat in this sort of restraint if you are suspicious of a fractured bone or spinal injury

3. If you are suspicious of a spinal injury lay the cat on a board and **immobilize** it with straps or cords. Pay special attention to immobilizing the head and neck. Better yet, put the cat in a large box.

What are the signs of shock?

"Systemic shock may cause irreversible injury to body cells, and it can be fatal."

Shock has many definitions. It is a complex systemic or whole body reaction to a number of situations. These include severe trauma, hemorrhage or sudden blood loss, heart failure and other causes of decreased circulation (e.g. severe and sudden allergic reaction and heat stroke). A life-threatening fall in blood pressure is a dangerous part of shock. If not treated quickly and effectively, systemic shock may cause irreversible injury to body cells, and it can be fatal.

Symptoms include rapid breathing which 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 cat may vomit.

What should I do if my cat is showing signs of shock?

Keep the cat as quiet as possible and try to conserve heat by covering it with blankets, towels, or even newspapers. Follow the **A, B, Cs** of first aid:

- A** Airway
- B** Breathing
- C** Cardiac function

Airway – Anything that obstructs the airway prevents oxygen entering the lungs. Do your best to clear the mouth and throat of any obstruction such as vomit, saliva or other foreign material. *Be careful*; your pet may bite you in panic.

"If you are unsure about the health or vaccination status of the injured pet, avoid contact with bodily fluids and blood."

Breathing – If the cat is unconscious and does not appear to be breathing, try gently pumping the chest with the palm of your hand, at the same time feeling just behind the elbow to detect a heart beat or pulse. If this is unsuccessful, give the pet rescue breathing (see below). Be careful – injured pets may bite you out of fear. If you are unsure about the health or vaccination status of the injured pet, avoid contact with bodily fluids and blood.

Cardiac function – If you are unable to detect a heartbeat or pulse, or if appears weak and slow, try pressing on the chest with your palm and elevate the lower half of the body to promote blood flow to the brain. Follow the steps below, under CPR.

How should I administer rescue breathing to my cat?

When you encounter an unresponsive cat, the first step is to ensure that there is an open airway.

1. Carefully pull the tongue out of the mouth.
2. Extend the head and neck so that they are in a straight line. DO NOT hyperextend the neck in animals that have obvious head and neck trauma.
3. Carefully clear the mouth of any debris that may be obstructing breathing.
4. Place a resuscitator mask or your hand over the cat's muzzle while holding the mouth shut and extend the neck. For cats, you can sometimes improvise with a styrofoam cup or other similar shaped object, by putting the opening over the cat's face and poking a large hole in the bottom for you to breathe through. Ensure a relatively tight seal around the muzzle.
5. Blowing into the nostrils, give 2–3 breaths and watch for a rise in the chest. If you do not see a rise in the chest, reposition the neck or search for airway obstruction.
6. If you believe there is an airway obstruction that you cannot see, turn the cat upside down, with the back against your chest. Give 5 sharp thrusts to the rib cage to try and expel any object.
7. For rescue breathing, provide 20 breaths per minute.
8. If the cat fails to breathe on its own, you may attempt an acupuncture maneuver. Press firmly with your fingernail or other hard object in the space between the nostrils and the upper lip (nasal philtrum). Do this for 10–30 seconds.

What else should I know about basic cat CPR?

"If there are still no obvious signs of life you should attempt cardiac compressions."

After you have established an airway and begun rescue breathing, if there are still no obvious signs of life you should attempt cardiac compressions.

1. Make sure there is no major bleeding. If there is bleeding, have an assistant manage the bleeding (see below) while you perform CPR.

2. If possible, lay the cat on its right side.
3. Feel (palpate) for a heart beat or femoral pulse. The femoral pulse is located inside the leg in the groin region. Cats DO NOT have a readily palpable carotid (neck) pulse.
4. Bend the left forearm and note the location where the elbow touches the chest. This is close to the middle of the rib cage.
5. Use one hand to compress the chest from both sides by putting your fingers on one side and your thumb on the other side of the chest. Compress the chest 3–5 times followed by 2 rescue breaths. The rate should be about 3 compressions every 2 seconds.
6. Try to compress the chest wall at least 30%. This is ½–1" (1–2 cm) in the average cat.

What is the specific first aid for some of the more common emergencies?

Blood loss

Once you have followed A, B, C above, if the bleeding is still severe, try to stop it. If bleeding is from a cut pad or paw, apply a dressing using a piece of absorbent bandage or clothing. If the bleeding persists and is soaking through the bandage, don't waste any more time, since this is a medical emergency. Most bleeding wounds will require medical or surgical treatment. If the wounds are treated within four (4) hours, they can often be sutured. Deep cuts treated after four hours have increased risk of infection and complication, and require more extensive surgery.

Burns and scalds

Cool the burned area with cold water as quickly as possible. Cover the burned area with damp towels. If the injury is due to a caustic substance, rinse with cold water for fifteen (15) minutes and contact your veterinarian for further advice. Animals that have been exposed to heat or smoke from a fire should be offered water as soon as the situation is stable.

Eye injuries

Injuries to the eye are always very painful and can threaten the eyesight. If a foreign body (grass awn, hair, piece of a claw, etc.) can be seen, it may be possible to remove it by gently rinsing the eye with eye wash or contact lens saline solution. Do not allow the cat to scratch or rub the eye. Seek veterinary advice as soon as possible.

"After being involved in an emergency or accident, it is important that you take your cat for a veterinary examination as soon as possible, even if it appears to have recovered fully."

As a final note, after being involved in an emergency or accident, it is important that you take your cat for a veterinary examination as soon as possible, even if it appears to have recovered fully.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM

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