

Emergencies in Cats

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 cat. For details on how to perform RESCUE BREATHING and FELINE CPR, see the separate fact sheet "First Aid in Cats".

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Some emergencies are obvious, while others may initially escape your notice. While no one can be prepared for all emergencies, there are some simple steps you should follow and clinical signs to look for if your cat is ill or involved in an accident. Who knows, it just may save your cat's life!

What should I do in an emergency?

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 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.

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, bag 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 some common veterinary medical emergencies that might happen to my cat?

"It is important to contact your veterinarian as soon as possible for more specific assistance."

There are many medical emergencies that may happen to your cat, ranging from being struck by an automobile to acute internal problems such as an intestinal or urinary blockage. Below is a list of some of the most common and serious conditions that require immediate veterinary attention, including brief descriptions of common clinical signs and the first aid steps you should follow. This list is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to serve as a general guide. In all veterinary medical emergencies, it is important to contact your veterinarian as soon as possible for more specific assistance.

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 wheals or hives on the skin, vomiting or diarrhea, and restlessness. These clinical signs can quickly progress to collapse and breathing difficulty. 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.

Automobile injury – Make sure your cat has a clear airway, but do *not* put your hand in its mouth if your cat is conscious. Cover wounds with whatever suitable material is available. Handle your cat with care, supporting its body as much as possible. Carry it in a basket, box, or cage to the veterinary hospital.

Bites and fight wounds – Clean the wounds immediately with warm water cover them to protect them from further contamination, and seek veterinary attention.

Bleeding (hemorrhage) – If hemorrhage is severe on a limb, apply a tourniquet above the wound just tight enough to significantly reduce flow of blood. Be sure to loosen it every twenty minutes. Apply a pad of cotton or other absorbent material over the wound or bleeding point. Bandage it firmly in place or simply apply direct pressure while you seek veterinary care.

Breathing difficulty – If your cat is having difficulty breathing, especially if the cat is "open mouth breathing", you need to get to the veterinarian without delay. For information on RESCUE BREATHING or CPR, see below.

Burns – 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 hidden by the cat's fur. One of the more common burns suffered by cats is when they jump onto a hot woodburning stove. Cool the burned area with cool water by running water over the burn or cover it with wet towels. This also helps remove caustic substances (acid or alkaline) if these are the cause. With caustic substances, flush the area by holding it under running water for 15 minutes. If loss of skin occurs, cover 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 cat requires immediate veterinary treatment to prevent permanent damage. During the seizure, DO NOT put your hand in its mouth. The cat WILL NOT swallow its tongue. Protect your cat from injuring itself and prevent it from falling. Otherwise, do not attempt to interrupt the seizure. Once your cat has recovered from the seizure, keep it warm and provide reassurance by talking calmly or gently petting it. Your cat will require veterinary attention to determine the cause of the seizures, but as long as the seizure wasn't prolonged, you can book the appointment at your earliest convenience.

Diarrhea or vomiting that is persistent – 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 in cats. 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. Do not force your cat to eat or drink – you may inadvertently worsen the condition. NEVER administer a human medication to your cat unless specifically advised to do so by your veterinarian. Both acetaminophen (Tylenol®) and acetylsalicylic acid (Aspirin®) are toxic to cats.

Eye injury – Many eye injuries can cause blindness or even loss of the eye if left untreated. If the cornea is scratched or punctured, it will be very painful. Prevent your cat from scratching at its eye causing further damage. Sudden blindness or vision loss (your cat will start bumping into things or have trouble jumping up onto the furniture, and you will probably notice that the pupils are widely dilated) may be a symptom of glaucoma. If your cat develops symptoms such as runny eyes, colored discharge from the eyes, squinting, sudden dilation of the eyes, or apparent blindness, get immediate veterinary treatment.

Heatstroke – The signs of heatstroke are excessive panting, lethargy, and distress; unconsciousness and death can quickly follow. Most cases of heat stroke occur when a cat is left in its carrier in an unventilated car. For immediate treatment, cool your cat's body temperature by placing it in a tub of cool water. When you are ready to transport your cat to the veterinary hospital, wrap it in a cool, wet towel. Animals that have been exposed to heat or smoke from a fire should be offered water as soon as the situation is stable.

Hemorrhagic gastroenteritis – this condition is characterized by severe bloody diarrhea, with or without vomiting. Often the cat will be very weak or will collapse. Seek immediate veterinary attention. This is a serious condition, especially in cats.

Injuries – Some injuries constitute medical emergencies, depending on the type and extent of wounds. If you suspect your cat has a broken bone, put it into a carrier or a box to support the affected area. 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.

Poisons – Common causes of poisoning in a cat include eating mice that have been killed by poison, eating slug or snail bait, or drinking ethylene glycol (antifreeze). The typical symptoms of poisoning are vomiting, diarrhea, salivation, skin irritation from caustic irritants, collapse or seizures. If a product label is available, see if there are first aid instructions, such as whether or not to induce vomiting. You can usually induce vomiting with 5 ml (one teaspoon) of hydrogen peroxide orally or a teaspoon of salt placed in the back of the mouth. Keep a sample of the vomit for testing. DO NOT INDUCE VOMITING if your cat has ingested foreign objects (plastic wrapping, paper, etc.). If corrosive or toxic material is on the skin, rinse for fifteen minutes. Bring a sample of the suspected poison with its container to the veterinary hospital.

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.

Vomiting that is persistent – (see above, under diarrhea and vomiting)

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.

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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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