

Emergency or False Alarm? Making the Call for Your Pet

Deciphering whether your pet's symptoms are a true emergency can be daunting. This article breaks down the essentials of what constitutes a veterinary emergency, helping you make informed decisions during crucial moments.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your animal companion becomes injured or ill, it can sometimes be challenging to determine whether you can take care of the situation at home or whether you need to have your pet seen by a veterinarian — either by appointment, or immediately
- Some injuries and illnesses require emergency veterinary care, for example, severe bleeding or ingestion of a toxic substance
- Other conditions are urgent, but not emergencies, such as mild allergic reactions
- The third category are minor injuries and illnesses you can safely treat at home, ideally with a follow-up call or visit to your veterinarian

When a furry family member becomes suddenly ill or injured, it's not always clear whether the situation can be safely handled at home or requires a trip to the veterinary clinic or even the nearest emergency animal hospital. While you don't want to put your injured or sick pet through the additional stress of an unnecessary veterinary visit, you definitely want to ensure he gets medical attention if he needs it.

Another issue is that dogs and especially cats are designed by nature to hide symptoms, so if your pet is showing vague signs of discomfort or pain, there's a good chance the situation is worse than it appears. Needless to say, it's always best to err on the side of caution. If you're concerned, take your pet in to be checked out.

It's important to note that **regular wellness visits** will also help you and your veterinarian know what's normal and what's not for your pet, as well as whether existing health conditions are improving or heading in the wrong direction.

Conditions Requiring Emergency Care

According to Dr. Lance Wheeler, a clinical assistant professor of emergency and critical care at the Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, there are two categories of emergencies:

"There are emergencies that are immediately life-threatening, like being hit by a car, and emergencies that become life-threatening after an unknown period of time, such as ingesting a toxin that doesn't display symptoms until 48 or 72 hours later. Beyond these two major categories, emergencies will most likely fall under intoxications, trauma, or an underlying condition that will require medical exams to determine what is wrong."¹

Obviously, life-threatening emergencies must be handled immediately. Getting your pet to the vet as soon as possible can make a significant difference in their chances of survival.

Some of the medical conditions, symptoms and situations that warrant emergency veterinary care are listed below. If you notice any of the following, get your pet to an emergency veterinary clinic immediately.

- Severe bleeding or bleeding that doesn't stop within five minutes
- **Choking**, difficulty breathing or nonstop coughing, and gagging
- Bleeding from nose, mouth, rectum, coughing up blood, or blood in urine
- Inability to urinate or pass feces (stool), or obvious pain associated with urinating or passing stool
- Injury to an eye(s)
- Ingestion of a toxic substance (such as antifreeze, xylitol, chocolate, rodent poison, etc.)
(more about this later)
- Seizures or staggering
- Fractured bones, severe lameness or inability to move leg(s)
- Obvious signs of pain or extreme anxiety
- **Heat stress or heatstroke**
- Severe vomiting or diarrhea — more than two episodes in a 24-hour period, or either of these combined with obvious illness or any of the other problems listed here
- **Refusal to drink** for 24 hours or more
- Unconsciousness
- Penetrating wounds to the chest, including deep lacerations or punctures
- A fever over 104°F with profound lethargy
- Bulging eyes and sudden blindness
- Burns or injuries in which a bone is exposed
- Loss of balance (inability to right herself or falls over due to inability to maintain balance)
- Symptoms of bloat (**gastric dilatation volvulus**), including a very distended abdomen, unproductive belching, retching or vomiting, abdominal pain, restlessness, shallow, rapid breathing and pale gums

Urgent (but Typically Not Emergency) Situations

Urgent medical concerns may not be life-threatening, but they can significantly impact your pet's health, and prompt veterinary care can give your dog or cat the best chance for a full recovery.

"This could include a fracture or broken bone, which is not usually life-threatening, but if we can get them to a surgeon sooner, the bone might heal better," Wheeler said. "Other signs of an urgent issue that's not necessarily life-threatening at the moment include blood in a pet's urine, vomit, or stool."

Additional examples include:

- **Eye problems** — If you notice any changes in your pet's eyes or vision, you'll want to call your veterinarian and schedule an appointment for the following day. **Eye problems** may include injuries, such as a scratch, eyelid or eyelash problem, chronic diseases like glaucoma, and more.
- **Vomiting and diarrhea** — Mild vomiting and diarrhea can be dealt with at home (see below), provided they resolve quickly, and your pet is not lethargic or showing other signs of illness. If vomiting and diarrhea continue for more than 24 hours, you'll want to seek veterinary care.
- **Allergic reactions** — Minor allergic reactions to insect bites or stings and food can typically be dealt with at home. Your pet may experience minor swelling, hives, or itching, but if she's having trouble breathing or seems uncomfortable, seek veterinary care right away.

For a mild allergic reaction to a bee sting, offer homeopathic Apis mel, quercetin or Benadryl if the swelling is not being controlled by natural methods. Serious allergic reactions require an immediate visit to your veterinarian or the closest emergency veterinary clinic.

If your pet's allergic symptoms are chronic, I recommend consulting with an integrative veterinarian who can help you get to the bottom of what's causing your pet's allergies, as well as develop a natural treatment plan for relief.

Toxic Exposures and Trauma

When a pet ingests a harmful substance, it can cause a wide range of symptoms. According to Wendy Greathouse, a referral coordinator for Texas A&M's Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital, common causes of pet poisoning include snake bites, and ingesting human medications, common household cleaners, holiday foods, spoiled food, or seasonal plants such as lilies, oleanders, and poinsettias.² Wheeler explains:

"Unless instructed otherwise, you should not try to induce vomiting because it can delay veterinary attention and cause injury. Instead, drive your pet to the vet as soon as possible and call either the veterinarian's office or a pet intoxication hotline on your way so that treatment is not delayed. The pet will have a better chance of survival in almost every scenario if we can get the toxin out of their system sooner."

Greathouse also recommends having specific information ready when you call:

"Be prepared to provide as much information as you can pertaining to the intoxication, such as what they ingested, how much they ate, the pet's weight, and what time the incident occurred," she says.

Trauma to your pet can result in burns, wounds, bleeding, and/or pain.

"Something as silly as running into a tree or falling a distance as short as one foot and hitting their head could be life-threatening, which is why it is best to visit a veterinarian instead of playing a guessing game with yourself," Wheeler says. "Just because your pet seems to be looking at you fine and acting normal doesn't mean they are."

Obviously, if you personally witness your pet experiencing trauma or suspect they may have been injured, it's crucial to seek immediate veterinary care.

Tips for Treating Minor Pet Injuries and Illnesses at Home

- **Nail injuries** — Dogs and cats can slice up their nails in a variety of ways — everything from a too-close **nail trim** that nicks the quick, to running outdoors over sharp rocks.

Solution: Styptic powder — If you don't have styptic powder on hand, for minor bleeding grab either cornstarch or flour from your kitchen, pour some into a small bowl, and dip the injured paw into the powder to stop the bleeding.

- **Cuts and scrapes** — Many pets manage to acquire minor cuts and scrapes while running around the backyard or out for a walk.

Solution: Contact lens saline solution — You can clean dirt and debris from your pet's minor wound with regular human contact lens saline solution. You can also use it to flush out dirt, sand, or other irritants from your pet's eye.

- **Constipation, diarrhea, hairballs, and other minor digestive issues** — Most pets at one time or another experience GI issues that last for a few days and disappear.

Solution: Canned pumpkin — It's a good idea to keep a can of 100% pumpkin in your kitchen cabinet for occasional mild tummy upsets. Give a teaspoon of pumpkin for every 10 pounds of body weight, one to two times a day, either in food or as a treat. Pumpkin is rich in soluble fiber that can ease both diarrhea and **constipation**.

- **Itchy, inflamed, or irritated paws** — This is a very common problem, especially in dogs, and especially when the weather turns warm.

Solution: Foot soaks — Soak your pet's paws in a solution of water mixed with povidone iodine (brand name Betadine) — add enough iodine to turn the water the color of iced tea. This will safely disinfect and soothe your pet's paws while removing irritants. Be aware that this solution may stain white fur a darker shade.

In most cases of even a minor pet injury or illness, after applying a home remedy, it's still a good idea to follow up with your veterinarian to ensure your dog or cat is receiving appropriate care. Chances are you won't need an appointment, but your vet may want to note the information in your pet's chart for follow up at your next regularly scheduled visit.

Sources and References

^{1,2} [Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences News, March 7, 2024](#)
