

Don't Ignore These Warning Signs of Pet Abuse

Do you know anyone who does this? It's now a Group A crime with FBI involvement, similar to other crimes you're already familiar with. And make no mistake — authorities are becoming savvier about whether it was this or an accident. Here are the signs of each.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- It can be difficult for veterinarians to determine if animal injuries are the result of abuse or accident
- A 2016 study revealed distinct differences in injuries caused by abuse or motor vehicle accidents
- Victims of animal abuse tended to have more injuries to the head, ribs, teeth and claws
- Pets injured in motor vehicle accidents had different patterns of injury, including greater incidence of skin abrasions, skin torn from tissue, lung collapse and bruising, and hind-end injury
- The FBI has classified animal cruelty as a "Group A" offense, alongside serious crimes like arson, kidnapping and homicide, emphasizing its severity and connection to other violent crimes

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On January 1, 2016, the FBI began collecting data on animal abuse reports. The FBI defines animal cruelty as “Intentionally, knowingly, or recklessly taking an action that mistreats or kills any animal without just cause, such as torturing, tormenting, mutilation, maiming, poisoning, or abandonment.”¹

The FBI has also added an Animal Abuse category to its National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS) and made it a “Group A” offense alongside arson, rape, kidnapping, extortion, theft, homicide and other crimes.

The data will be used to design education and intervention programs to help stop animal abuse and track incidents that may be precursors to crimes against humans. It’s an incredibly important step not only to protect animals but also because animal abuse is linked to violent crimes against people.

It can be difficult, however, for veterinarians to identify whether an animal’s injuries are the result of abuse or accident, so researchers from Tufts University in partnership with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) have conducted a study to help define the differences.

How Animal Abuse Injuries Are Distinguished from Accidental Injuries

Currently, only general guidelines exist to help veterinarians identify animal abuse. Among the top signs include:²

- Inconsistent history

- Previous injuries or deaths in other animals in the same household (especially when unexplained)
- Repetitive injuries
- Defensive or unconcerned behavior of the owner
- Abnormal behavior in the animal, such as fear

Even still, it can be difficult to uncover the true cause of the injuries. As noted in the Journal of Forensic Sciences:³

“Animals are unable to speak for themselves, and some animals’ innate personality and trust will even belie the cruelty they have suffered. Additionally, the actual cause of injury often differs from the description provided by the client.”

A Revealing Comparison of Injuries Caused by Motor Vehicle Accidents or Abuse

The Tufts University and ASPCA study involved data from nearly 500 dogs and cats — 426 of which were involved in motor vehicle accidents (MVAs) and 50 that were victims of criminal animal abuse.

The injuries had unique characteristics that researchers believe could be used to establish patterns to help veterinarians determine the true cause of the trauma.

For instance, when ribs were fractured in an MVA, the fractures typically occurred on one side of the body. In abused animals, rib fractures were seen on both sides of the body. In addition, the study noted:⁴

“Injuries significantly associated with MVA were pelvic fractures, pneumothorax, pulmonary contusion, abrasions, and degloving wounds ...

Injuries associated with NAI [non-accidental injuries] were fractures of the skull, teeth, vertebrae, and ribs, scleral hemorrhage, damage to claws, and evidence of older fractures.”

In short, victims of animal abuse tended to have more injuries to the head, ribs, teeth and claws.

Pets injured in motor vehicle accidents had different patterns of injury, including greater incidence of skin abrasions, skin torn from tissue, lung collapse and bruising, and hind-end injury, which might be because the animals were hit while running away from the vehicle.

Study collaborator Dr. Robert Reisman, supervisor of forensic sciences, ASPCA Anti-Cruelty Group, said in a Tufts University news release:⁵

“The forensic veterinarian’s job is to use scientific evidence to tell the story of an animal victim of cruelty. This study serves as a valuable tool in that process ...

This study contributes to the expanding body of research in the growing field of veterinary forensic medicine and will help forensic veterinarians continue to give a voice to the voiceless.”

Emerging Data May Help Save Animals from Abuse

It's incredibly important for veterinarians to be able to identify abused animals. This way, the abuse can be reported and the offenders hopefully stopped before harming another animal.

Likewise, the NIBRS is an incident-based reporting system in which police report detailed information about crimes and their surrounding circumstances (including the offenses, characteristics of the victims and offenders, people arrested in connection with the incident and more).

As of January 2016, all U.S. police departments are required to report animal abuse to the NIBRS. The Animal Welfare Institute plans to use the data to track where animal abuse is most likely to occur and among what age groups.

The hope is that they can then design education and intervention programs to help stop the abuse. Aside being a big win for animals, the move may help prevent human crimes too. According to the FBI website:⁶

“If somebody is harming an animal, there is a good chance they also are hurting a human,” said John Thompson, deputy executive director of the National Sheriffs’ Association. ‘If we see patterns of animal abuse, the odds are that something else is going on.’”

How to Report Animal Cruelty

If you've witnessed an act of animal abuse, it's important to report the incident to your local law enforcement agency, animal control agency, humane society or taxpayer-funded animal shelter.

You'll need to find out who is responsible for investigating and enforcing anti-cruelty laws in your area. If one of the agencies mentioned does not do this, they should be able to direct you to the proper authorities.⁷ Please do speak up for the animals around you, as they do not have a voice for themselves.

When reporting an incident, give as much information as possible, including dates, times, and the location of the animals. If possible, include photos of the location or animals, and remember to follow up on any reports you've made to authorities if you don't hear back in a timely manner.

Also, while you may report animal abuse anonymously, cases are more likely to be pursued if there are credible witnesses available to back up the report. So, ideally, share your contact information and that of anyone else who witnessed the event. Finally, while some animal abuse injuries are obvious, others are less so.

Just as veterinarians may have difficulty identifying abuse from accidents, you may not be sure if an animal you've seen is actually being abused. The ASPCA has compiled top signs to help you recognize animal cruelty, below.⁸

- Tight collar that has caused a neck wound or has become embedded in the pet's neck
- Open wounds, signs of multiple healed wounds or an ongoing injury or illness that isn't being treated
- Untreated skin conditions that have caused loss of hair, scaly skin, bumps or rashes
- Extreme thinness or emaciation — bones may be visible
- Fur infested with fleas, ticks or other parasites
- Patches of bumpy, scaly skin rashes

- Signs of inadequate grooming, such as extreme matting of fur, overgrown nails and dirty coat
- Weakness, limping or the inability to stand or walk normally
- Heavy discharge from eyes or nose
- An owner striking or otherwise physically abusing an animal
- Visible signs of confusion or extreme drowsiness
- Pets are tied up alone outside for long periods of time without adequate food or water, or with food or water that is unsanitary
- Pets are kept outside in inclement weather without access to adequate shelter
- Pets are kept in an area littered with feces, garbage, broken glass or other objects that could harm them
- Animals are housed in kennels or cages (very often crowded in with other animals) that are too small to allow them to stand, turn around and make normal movements

Sources and References

¹ [Huffington Post January 8, 2016](#)

^{2, 3} [Journal of Forensic Sciences March 3, 2016](#)

⁴ [R&D Magazine May 2016 \(Archived\)](#)

⁵ [Tufts University May 25, 2016](#)

⁶ [FBI.gov February 1, 2016](#)

^{7, 8} [ASPCA, Report Animal Cruelty](#)
