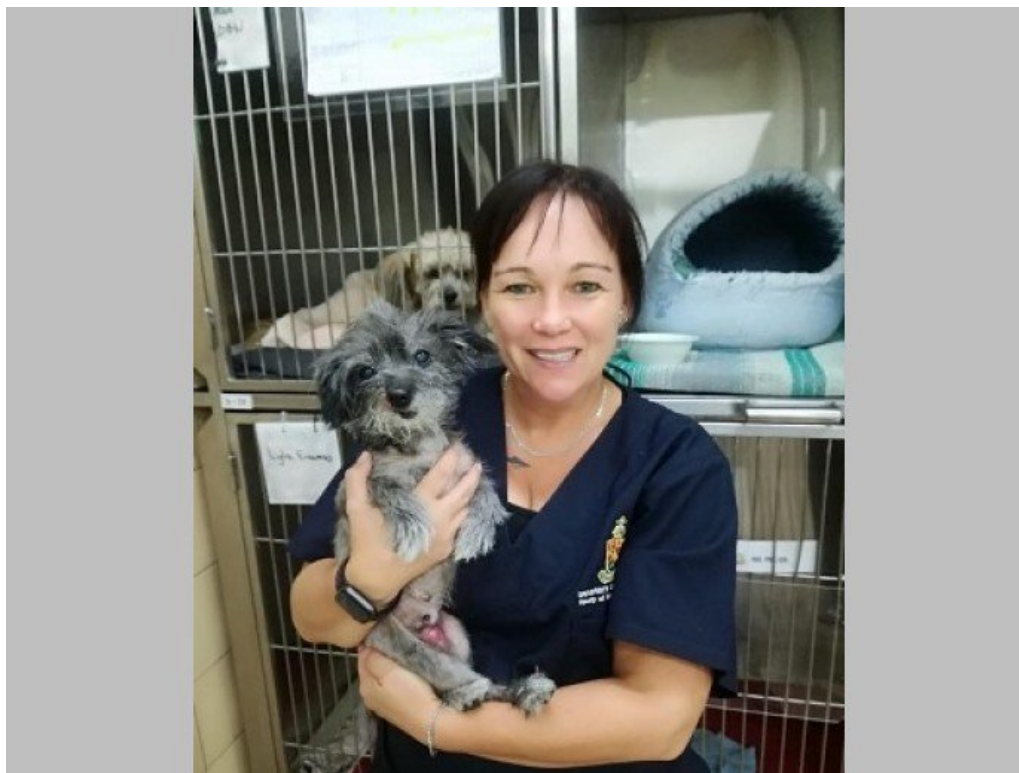


First aid for pets – The dos and don'ts

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Pets are inquisitive by nature and sometimes their curiosity leads to unexpected injuries or getting into emergency situations. Sometimes after hours. In these situations, it is vital that they receive rapid and effective first aid treatment to stabilise them, so you can transport them safely to a vet.

Please remember that any first aid administered should be followed by **immediate veterinary care**. First aid care is **not a substitute for veterinary care**, but is aimed at saving your pet's life until it can receive veterinary treatment.

In this comprehensive article, Dr Vanessa McClure, senior lecturer and small animal specialist in the Faculty's Department of Companion Animal Clinical Studies discusses a few emergency situations that could arise and the treatment that can be provided in each situation. She concludes with tips on the most needed contents of a first aid kit for your pets. Here's her advice.

It is important to bear in mind that pets, no matter how gentle they normally are, can become unpredictable and might bite and scratch when they are injured, in pain, scared or confused. Keep your face away from the animal's mouth and do not try to hug and comfort them. Approach them slowly and talk to them softly. Initial examination of the pet should be slow and careful. It may be necessary to use a muzzle to avoid getting bitten but only if the pet doesn't have facial injuries and is not vomiting. Any type of strapping like stockings or gauze rolls can be used as a muzzle. Cats and small dogs can be wrapped in a towel to restrain them but make sure the pet is not wrapped too tightly and its nose is uncovered so it can breathe freely.



Poisoning

Substances that are toxic to humans are usually toxic to pets too, but a few substances that are non-toxic to humans, are harmful to pets. This is because they have different enzymes involved in the digestion of certain substances.

Some foods and common household products that are toxic to pets are:

- Raisins and grapes
- Chocolate (the darker the more toxic)
- Lily flowers (cats)
- Garlic and onion
- Paracetamol and Ibuprofen
- Slug bait and rat bait
- Anti-freeze
- Mouldy food
- Xylitol sweetener

If your pet's eyes have been exposed to a toxic substance rinse the eyes with copious amounts of clean water. If the substance came into contact with skin, wash the skin with soap and lots of water. If you suspect your pet has eaten something toxic, write down the time it happened, and how much was ingested. If possible, take the packaging of the suspected toxin along to the vet. If the pet is vomiting, use gloves to pick up the vomit and place it in a bag to take along to the vet. Do not try to induce vomiting or give any medication – this includes activated charcoal - unless your vet tells you to do so. Activated charcoal is administered to absorb certain toxins, but there are toxins that won't get absorbed by it. Furthermore, if given incorrectly, or if the pet is vomiting, it may end up breathing the charcoal into its lungs which can be fatal. Do not give any liquids (such as milk), as this may aid the rapid spread of the poison through the body.

Sadly, malicious poisoning is common in South Africa. Criminals may poison the animal –usually a dog - to gain access to a property. If you suspect this to be the case, call the police immediately. Do not leave the house or any young children unattended while you take the animal to the vet as the criminals might return to finish what they started.

Seizures

If your pet is paddling (moving their paws randomly), salivating, and doesn't respond when you call them, it may be having a seizure. If this happens, clear the area of any objects that may cause injuries, but do not try to hold the animal still or open their mouth. Of course, it is very distressing seeing your pet go through this but take a video of the episode and note how long it lasts. This will be very useful information for the vet. Once the seizure has stopped, the pet will be disorientated, so keep them contained in a safe area until you can take them to the vet. If the seizure lasts for longer than 2 minutes, get them to the vet immediately.

Bleeding

If you see your pet is bleeding, first try to establish the origin of the blood. Then use a clean towel, gauze swab, sanitary pad or bandage to apply pressure to the wound. Keep pressure on the wound for about 3 minutes (that's how long it usually takes for a solid clot to form). If blood soaks through, don't remove the covering; rather add more layers and keep applying pressure. Try to keep your pet calm and as still as possible and then call the vet and give them as much information as possible. Severe bleeding can quickly be life-threatening. In such a case get your animal to a veterinarian immediately.

Choking

Check your pet's mouth to see if there is something stuck in its throat. Swipe your finger along the inside of the mouth but be careful to avoid a bite. Next, slide your finger down toward the centre of the throat, over the base of the tongue, gently sweeping the finger to remove any foreign object. (Do not go too deep into the throat, or you will reach the Adam's apple that feels like a smooth bone; do not pull on it). If you can see an object, try to remove it with pliers or tweezers – but be careful not to push it further down the throat. Don't spend more than 5 minutes trying to remove the object; rather get your pet to your vet right away. If you cannot remove the object or your pet collapses, try to dislodge the object by forcing air out of the animal's lungs by placing both your hands on either side of its rib cage and firmly applying quick pressure 3-4 times. Or you can perform the Heimlich manoeuvre by putting the pet on its back, placing your hands over the abdomen near the bottom of his rib cage, and gently but firmly thrusting toward the spine. Keep repeating until the object is dislodged or until you arrive at the vet practice.

Sometimes a bone or stick can get lodged across the roof of a dog's mouth. If this happens, the dog usually paws at his mouth or struggles to close its jaws. Try to remove the object by hand or with tweezers - otherwise your vet will have to sedate the dog to remove the object.

Snake bites

If your pet is bitten by a snake, try to identify the snake if possible (a photo will also do). This will help the vet decide on the best treatment for the pet. Keep the pet calm and as still as possible. Do not manipulate the bite area: don't cut over the fang marks, or attempt to "suck out" the venom, and don't put an ice pack or tourniquet on the area. Just seek immediate assistance from a vet.

Insect bites and stings

If you can see the stinger, remove it as quickly as possible by scraping it out with a credit card or other hard material. Alternatively, use tweezers but be sure to grasp the stinger only, not the venom sac. Apply a cool compress to the area. A paste made of baking soda and water can be applied to the area to neutralize the acid of the venom. Some animals will only have a mild reaction to the sting whereas others could have severe symptoms such as difficulty breathing. It is therefore important to monitor the pet closely for 24 hours and take them to the vet immediately if you see facial swelling or breathing difficulties.

Human medications for pets

There are human drugs that we could give our pets, but this is not advisable without consulting your vet. When humans take medication, the dose differs for adults and children. All humans have the same enzymes to metabolise drugs. Animals are different. Besides huge differences in their sizes, various species of animals (for instance dogs, cats and rabbits) metabolise many medications differently than we do. When a vet prescribes medication for your pet, they will take into account the species, weight and age, before they decide on the drug and the correct dose. Please always speak to your vet first before administering any medication.

First aid kit for pets

- Phone number of your closest emergency vet clinic
- Digital thermometer- to take your pet's temperature (normal temperature for a dog and cat is between 37.5 - 39°C)
- Muzzle
- Spare leash and collar
- Gauze roll for wrapping wounds
- Clean towels (used for cleaning, restraining or padding)
- Gauze swab, feminine sanitary product or bandage material to control bleeding or protect wounds
- Adhesive tape for securing bandages
- Syringe without needle to give oral treatments or flush wounds
- K-Y jelly to protect wounds or eyes
- Saline solution for cleansing wounds
- Tweezers for removing stings or objects from the mouth
- Scissors

Finally, veterinary emergency and critical care treatments can be very costly (as they usually occur after hours), so it is important to plan for the unexpected. Pet health insurance is widely available and should be considered by all pet owners when they decide to get a pet.

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