

The first step in administering appropriate first aid is recognising that an animal needs help. A sign that all is not well is the pet not acting normally. Sometimes this can be very obvious (the animal is vomiting, bleeding, or having seizures) but sometimes the change may be subtle and not so obvious (the animal is eating less, hiding, or doesn't want to play). Noticing a change is easier with an animal you know well and more difficult for a visiting animal, but having a good general understanding of normal dog and cat behaviour is very helpful.

If you are worried about an animal in your care it is always best to 'play it safe' and consult a veterinarian. A telephone call may be enough to put your mind at rest but a visit may be necessary.

Signs that all is not well

The following is not an exhaustive list but examples of signs that may indicate a developing problem:

- **An animal that doesn't want to eat and/or drink anything** or only nibbles when previously it was a great eater. This must be differentiated from an animal that is a fussy eater from the moment it arrives and the owner has warned you of this tendency. Appetite is a less reliable sign of ill health in a fussy eater, but if the animal is unwell other signs are likely to be present.
- **An animal that doesn't want to go for a walk or play**, or appears reluctant to move at all. Such an animal may be feeling unwell and therefore doesn't want to be active, or it may actually be unable to move (e.g. it is injured or paralysed).
- **Vomiting and/or diarrhoea** that continues for more than one day. There are many causes of vomiting and diarrhoea, including (but not limited to) a change in food, eating something that has gone off or is poisonous, intestinal worms, eating grass, a blocked bowel (from swallowing an object such as a ball), and envenomation from a tick or a snake bite.
- **Excessive salivation and drooling** can occur in both dogs and cats and can be a sign of bad teeth, heat stroke, cane toad poisoning, other poisoning, or be a sign that the animal cannot close its mouth.
- **Convulsions**. These are rare, and unless an animal has been diagnosed with epilepsy convulsions indicate a serious problem that should always be reported to a vet.
- **Bleeding** from anywhere – the mouth, nose, anus or from an obvious wound. An animal should not be bleeding from anywhere so this will always need to be investigated.
- **Trauma** signs might include wounds, swellings, limping, limbs at unnatural angles, unconsciousness, and pain. Trauma must always be taken seriously and help sought.
- **Painful, smelly ears, or head tilting**. Animals will not want to be touched near their ears and they are often also off their food.
- **Watery eyes or eyes with a nasty discharge**. Sometimes the eyes appear 'glued' shut.
- **Coughing and/or gagging**. Coughing can sound dry and painful or moist as if they are trying to cough something up. Neither is good and both need veterinary help.
- **Excessive itching and scratching** which may be accompanied by hair loss and red, sore looking skin.

Steps to help your animal

1. **Stay calm** and assess the situation.
2. **Telephone a veterinarian** to seek advice if the pet is showing signs such as described above, its behaviour has changed, or you are feeling concerned for any reason. If possible telephone the animal's usual vet, but if this is not possible seek advice with your local or after-hours vet. Be ready to describe accurately and calmly what is happening, and what signs the animal is showing.
3. **Keep the pet quiet** while you seek advice.
4. **Follow the veterinarian's advice.** Have a pen ready so that you can write down any instructions given to you. If the vet says the animal needs immediate attention, be ready to take it in. Ask the vet what signs to watch for that would indicate that the situation is deteriorating.
5. **Continue to monitor** the animal and/or transport the animal to the vet.

Moving an unwell or injured animal

It is important to transport the animal so that it remains as comfortable as possible and the condition or injury does not worsen because of being moved. Some animals can become fractious when they are sick, injured, or in pain, and may be more likely to bite or scratch. It is important to remain safe while transporting an animal.

Cats: Always transport cats in a secure carry cage, preferably the one the cat is used to and came to your house in.

- Make the cage as comfortable as possible by, for example, including a favourite blanket and toy in the cage. If the cat is sensitive, appears anxious or scared, cover the cage with a towel to help it feel more secure.
- If the cat is injured or in pain, it may be necessary to use a towel to pick the cat up. Support the body of the cat when you pick it up as this will minimise pain.



This fact sheet has been prepared for your information by RSPCA Queensland

Locked Bag 3000, Archerfield BH Qld 4108 P 07 3426 9999

V 2.0 15.09.2015

Pet First Aid

Dogs: Unless completely impractical, always have a dog on a leash when it is outside your secure garden. This also applies when you are taking it to the vet. If possible, secure the dog in your car using a seat belt and harness or a crate. If transporting on the back of a ute or truck, preferably use a covered crate. Only tether the dog on a short leash as a last resort; under these circumstances, ensure that it cannot reach the sides of the vehicle and jump or fall off.

- If the dog is in pain and doesn't want to be touched, use a muzzle before trying to move it. If you haven't got a specifically made muzzle that fits the dog, use a strong bandage as a temporary muzzle. Remember to use the muzzle to save yourself from being bitten but leave it in place only when needed, as it prevents the dog panting.
- If the dog has a potential broken leg, internal injuries or is unconscious, it is best to use a board or strong blanket to move it. This will minimise movement that might cause pain and further injuries. Only use a board when the board with the dog on it can be easily loaded and unloaded from your car – the last thing you want to do is move the animal off the board and into the car (double handling). For larger dogs use a blanket. Move the dog gently onto the blanket and carry as if it is a sling or stretcher. Leave the dog on the board/blanket in the car so it can be easily moved out of the car. You will definitely need at least two people to carry a dog in a blanket (remember it is being used as a stretcher so you have a person at each end).



First aid for specific problems

Hit by a car: If an animal has been hit by a car always have it checked by a vet. It may have internal injuries that are not obvious, or a broken limb (animals have been known to run in from the road despite having a broken leg).

Bleeding from a wound: If an animal has an obvious wound that is bleeding, apply pressure with a clean cloth. If necessary, maintain pressure on wound during the trip to the vet.

Poisoning: If you suspect poisoning (e.g. you find the dog with a half-chewed poison packet, or you know it has eaten a toxic substance) telephone the vet for immediate advice. Only make the animal vomit if advised to by the vet and only in the way suggested by the vet. Take the half chewed packet or whatever material you have relevant to the poisoning to the vet to aid in the diagnosis.

Snake bite: If you suspect a snake bite keep the animal as quiet as possible while you seek help. If possible identify the snake, but if you cannot don't worry. Anti-venom may be necessary; let your vet decide.

Choking: If the animal is having trouble breathing, **and** if safe, have a look to see if you can see an object in its mouth or throat that is causing the difficulty. If you can remove it safely (without pushing it further down or getting bitten) do so but take the animal to a vet for a full check.

Heat Stress: In our Australian summer, dogs in particular can overdo it and run around to the point of heat stress or heat stroke. Dogs will appear disorientated, salivate excessively, stagger, pant and breathe rapidly, and can even collapse. It is important to cool the dog down; bring it into a cool shady area, use wet towels, fans or air-conditioning. Once you have initiated cooling, call the vet.

Cane toad poisoning: Cane toads can poison directly (by the dog licking or biting a toad) or indirectly (by the dog drinking water cane toads have been swimming in). Signs seen include excessive salivation, brick-red gums, collapse, seizures, panting, and in cats, vomiting. If possible, wash the gums to remove the poison. Use a wet cloth and swab the gums (repeat many times) or with a dog, spray water across the gums making sure you don't direct it down the throat. Always contact the vet.

Paralysis (or scrub) ticks: These ticks can cause serious illness and death. The initial signs are often minimal – change in voice, slight stagger in the hind legs, and coughing up phlegm – but these progress to paralysis of the hind limbs, which worsens to include paralysis of the front limbs and eventually the breathing. Finding and removing the tick/s is essential – gently feel over the animal's body. Ticks can feel like little warts. Once you have located a tick remove it using tweezers (clasp the tick next to the skin and remove) but keep looking because there may be more than one tick. Always take the pet to a vet as even after the tick is gone, the venom is still in the animal and may cause problems.