



## Emergencies in Cats and Dogs (5 weeks and older)

It can be scary trying to decide whether a health problem in your foster cat or dog is an emergency or not. When in doubt, always contact your foster coordinator. Fortunately, emergencies in foster pets don't happen very often. But it is helpful to know how to recognize symptoms that your foster pets need emergency veterinary care and what you can do to help them in the meantime.

### Importance of Daily Monitoring and Early Intervention

- Monitoring of adult cats and dogs is critical for early detection of health problems, and assessing the effectiveness of medical treatment. This includes tracking body weights every 1-2 weeks; and the daily recording of appetite, activity level, peeing and pooping, and any signs of illness.
- Daily monitoring of your foster cats and dogs will help you recognize what is normal, so that you are better able to detect the abnormal.
- Early intervention is important for two reasons:
  - A delay in seeking emergency veterinary care for foster cats and dogs can prolong recovery time or result in a negative outcome.
  - A delay in a diagnostic test increases the chance of a highly contagious and potentially fatal disease spreading through an animal shelter or rescue group. If an infectious disease is caught early, quarantine measures can be implemented to prevent further spread of the disease.

### Highly Contagious and Potentially Fatal Infectious Disease- A Population Emergency

- Cats and dogs in animal shelters and rescue groups have increased susceptibility to infectious diseases, and this is one reason why it is so important to catch signs of infectious disease early. There are several explanations for why this population is more susceptible:
  - There are many animals coming into animal shelters and rescue groups who may not have been vaccinated. They could be strays without an owner, or they could have had an owner who did not have them vaccinated.



- Many animals coming in may have been exposed to infectious diseases before intake, but are not yet showing symptoms. This is especially true of animals who were transported from one animal shelter or rescue group to another.
  - Also, there are kittens and puppies under 6 months of age coming in whose immunity from their mother's milk is wearing off and who are more likely to be unvaccinated on intake compared to adults.
- The most important emergency in animal shelters and rescue groups is the presence of a highly contagious and potentially fatal infectious disease in one of its cats or dogs, especially since this is a population with increased susceptibility to infectious disease. It is very important to catch such infectious disease early, so that quarantine measures can be implemented to prevent it from spreading. It is an emergency not just for an individual foster pet who is sick, but for all cats or dogs in the animal shelter or rescue group who are at risk of catching the disease.
- Two of the most common highly contagious and potentially fatal infectious diseases, especially in cats and dogs under 4 months of age, are feline panleukopenia virus (aka feline distemper virus) and canine parvovirus. These diseases can cause vomiting, diarrhea, dehydration, and even unexpected death.
- Other potentially fatal infectious diseases of concern include canine distemper virus and a severe form of calicivirus in cats called virulent systemic feline calicivirus. With these diseases, what can initially appear to be a simple case of kennel cough in a dog or an upper respiratory infection in a cat can turn out to be a very serious infectious disease that affects multiple organs and/or causes pneumonia.
- It is important to understand that we have not discussed all possible serious infectious diseases that your foster pet could get, these are just some examples given to illustrate why you should monitor your foster pet daily and pay attention to whether any symptoms of illness are getting worse. If your foster pet has upper respiratory symptoms, vomiting, or diarrhea, and his or her condition is not improving or is getting worse, you should contact your foster coordinator.

### **Common, Easy to Recognize Emergencies in Cats and Dogs (5 weeks and older)**

- Emergencies that only affect an individual cat or dog include common, easy to recognize emergencies:
  - **Choking**
  - **Bleeding**
  - **Severe bruising**
  - **Major wound**
  - **Broken bones or severe lameness**



- **Trauma:** A cat or a dog with a history of trauma also needs to be checked out by a veterinarian immediately, even if he or she initially appears to be okay. Trauma can be caused by a lot of things including being hit by a car, being stepped on, falling from high place, or fighting with another cat or dog.
- **Known ingestion of a toxic substance or a foreign body:** If a cat or dog has eaten a toxic substance such as rat poison, or swallowed a foreign body such as a long piece of ribbon, time is of essence. There is a limited time frame after a cat or dog eats something, usually within the first hour or two, where the veterinarian can induce vomiting that brings up the toxic substance or foreign body.

## Most Common Emergency Symptoms in Cats and Dogs (5 weeks and older)

- Some emergencies are harder to recognize. This is where it becomes more challenging for a foster caregiver to decide what is or is not an emergency.
- The most common emergency symptoms in cats and dogs who are 5 weeks of age and older include:
  - **Difficult or labored breathing:** open mouth breathing, gasping for air, very noisy or raspy breathing, very fast breathing, abdomen moving more than chest in an effort to breathe. There are many possibilities for what could be causing difficult or labored breathing, ranging from asthma to heart disease to pneumonia to a contagious and potentially fatal infectious disease.
  - **Seizures:** muscle twitching or jerking of limbs, drooling, disorientation, accidental peeing or pooping during the episode. There is a variety of causes of seizures. In young kittens and puppies, seizures are most commonly associated with low blood sugar. It is also important to recognize that seizures in dogs can also be a symptom of canine distemper virus, which is one of the highly contagious and potentially fatal infectious diseases that we have discussed.
  - **Staggering, incoordination, collapse:** There are many causes of staggering, incoordination, and collapse. Common causes are the ingestion of a toxic substance or a poisonous plant, inner ear infections, geriatric vestibular syndrome, trauma from a head injury, strokes, and brain tumors. Heart disease can also cause a cat or dog to collapse
  - **Serious cases of vomiting and/or diarrhea:** accompanied by lethargy (weakness or lack of energy); moderate to large amounts; persistent; vomit or diarrhea contains blood, or traces of an ingested toxic substance or foreign body. Also, vomiting and/or diarrhea can be a sign of a highly contagious or potentially fatal infectious disease such as feline panleukopenia (aka feline distemper) virus or canine parvovirus, especially in kittens and puppies.



- **Unexpected death:** Could indicate a highly contagious and potentially fatal infectious disease, which is an emergency in animal shelters or rescue groups. Cats or dogs exposed to the one who died may be at risk for contracting the same infectious disease and spreading it to other cats and dogs.
- **Severe lethargy:** barely moving, difficulty holding head up, lying flat out, not responsive.
- **Body temperature of 104.5°F or higher or 98.5°F or lower:** The normal body temperature in cats and dogs 5 weeks and older is 100.5-102.5°F.
- **Moderate to severe dehydration:** skin tent, sticky gums, eyes have sunken-in appearance. Common causes of dehydration include watery diarrhea, frequent vomiting, overheating in hot weather, or not drinking enough water.
- **Abnormal gum color:** blue or grey indicates lack of oxygen, dark red may indicate a blood infection, white indicates blood loss, yellow indicates a liver problem or a blood disorder.
- **Pain:** vocalization (e.g., crying, yowling, groaning), lethargy (weakness or lack of energy), not eating, aggressiveness (e.g., growling, trying to bite). A cat or dog who is in pain is an animal welfare concern. It is very important to get emergency veterinary care as soon as possible, so that the cause of the pain can be addressed and, if necessary, pain medications can be administered to relieve suffering. Do not administer any pain medications without a veterinarian's okay. Many pain medications that are over the counter can be toxic to cats or dogs.
- **Severe swelling:** commonly seen with injury, infection (abscess), or an allergic reaction. Swelling due to an allergic reaction is usually on the face and legs and may be accompanied by itching, vomiting, and/or fever. If left untreated, or if not treated quickly enough, a severe allergic reaction could result in death.
- **Straining to pee or poop:** Straining to pee or poop can be mild to moderate (normal to slightly decreased output of pee or poop), or it can be severe (little to no output of pee or poop). Mild to moderate straining to pee or poop needs to be addressed by a veterinarian as soon as possible, but is not always an emergency. Severe straining to pee or poop is an emergency.
- **Difficulty giving birth:** straining or strong contractions for 1 hour without delivery of a kitten or puppy, any unusual vaginal discharge (cloudy, black, or foul smelling), excessive vaginal bleeding.
- **Distended belly:** A distended belly has a rounded look to it and feels like it is stretched out and tight. A distended belly by itself is not usually an emergency. A distended belly that is accompanied by at least one other symptom (lethargy, pain or discomfort, vomiting, straining to pee or poop) is an emergency.



- These common emergency symptoms are indications to seek veterinary emergency care immediately, but be aware that this is not a complete list of every emergency symptom you might see in a cat or dog. If you are concerned, or if you are not sure whether it is an emergency, you should contact your foster coordinator immediately. It is always better to be safe than sorry with foster cats and dogs, especially if a highly contagious and potentially fatal infectious disease is suspected.

## What You Can Do Until Emergency Veterinary Care is Obtained

- If your cat or dog is **choking**, check the back of the throat for foreign bodies.
- If your cat or dog is **bleeding**, stop the bleeding by applying pressure with a clean towel.
- If your cat or dog has **difficult or labored breathing**
  - Ensure a clear airway. Gently clean any nasal discharge off nostrils with soft cotton squares or a soft wash cloth moistened with warm water.
  - Avoid upsetting your cat or dog. For example, do not force your foster pet into a carrier if he or she is struggling and/or resisting you. Stressing out a cat or dog who is having trouble breathing can potentially cause death.
  - If you have an oxygen tank available, provide supplemental oxygen by holding the tube in front of your cat's or dog's nose. Or better yet, place an oxygen mask around his or her muzzle.
- If your cat or dog is having **seizures** or has **staggering, incoordination, or collapse**:
  - If it is a kitten or puppy, rub white corn syrup on the gums with a cotton swab. If you do not have white corn syrup, maple syrup can be used.
  - Protect your cat or dog from hitting his or her head, or falling from a high place.
  - Check your house for evidence of ingestion of a poisonous substance.
- If a cat or dog has **high body temperature**, start cooling efforts:
  - Spray your cat or dog with water, or immerse him/her in water. Do not do this if your cat or dog is sick! Getting a cat or dog wet who has a fever from an upper respiratory infection could make his or her illness even worse.
  - Put rubbing alcohol on the foot pads.
  - Use fans.
  - Do not use ice. This may slow down heat elimination and have the opposite effect.
- If a cat or dog has **low body temperature**, start slow warming efforts. Use hot water bottles, a Snuggle Safe® Disc, or rice packs. Be sure to wrap these items in a towel so that they do not burn your cat or dog.
- If a cat or dog has a **serious case of vomiting and/or diarrhea**:



- If there is diarrhea or occasional vomiting of small amounts, you should encourage frequent intake of small volumes of water.
- If there is frequent vomiting of moderate to large amounts, it is best to withhold water until emergency veterinary care can be obtained, but no longer than 12-24 hours.
- In cats and dogs older than 4 months, you should withhold food until veterinary care can be obtained, but no longer than 24-48 hours.
- In cats and dogs younger than 4 months, do not withhold food or water, their blood sugar can drop to dangerously low levels which can cause seizures, and they can quickly become dehydrated. Rather, provide very small amounts of water and food frequently.
- If a **kitten or puppy is not eating and/or seems lethargic**, rub white corn syrup on the gums with a cotton swab. If you do not have white corn syrup, maple syrup may be used.

