



# First Aid for Dogs

All dog owners need to know a little animal first aid. Whether it is for a time when your own pet gets injured or is unwell, or if you see an injured animal when you are out and about.

## First Aid Principles

First aid principles for animals are really no different to those for human first aid, so if you have ever done a human first aid course, you can probably apply a lot of the theory to animals.

The first rule of First Aid is to '**do no harm**' – don't let your actions make things worse. In most cases, this means transferring the animal to proper veterinary care as soon as possible or seeking proper veterinary advice. This is not the time for 'Dr Google'.

***Injured and unwell animals should be checked by a veterinarian as soon as possible.***

***First aid is not a substitute for proper veterinary care. Early veterinary intervention should always be the priority.***

## Safety First!

Following on from the human first aid principles, the next step is to check for danger before rushing in to help.

In any emergency situation, remaining as calm as possible is key. We all want to jump in to help an injured animal (probably more so than an injured person!), but we need to make sure that we are not putting ourselves into danger to do so.

For example, if an animal has been hit by a vehicle, is injured and on the road or in a place that presents danger from traffic, you need to make sure it is safe before rushing in to help.

If there has been a dog fight, you need to be careful that you do not get bitten trying to break the fight up, and make sure the dogs are properly separated so there is no chance of things starting up again.



Injured animals are often scared and frightened and even the sweetest, gentlest pet may behave in a way we don't expect to protect themselves from further pain.

You need to move slowly and carefully and manage your own safety by using appropriate restraints such as leashes and muzzles if needed.

Remember injured animals may panic, try to escape, lash out or even bite when you go to handle them so be super cautious. Be very aware of where you position yourself and keep an eye on what is happening around you as you approach or handle the injured animal.

Sometimes covering the animal's head/eyes with a blanket or towel can help reduce stress and help calm the animal.

If you need a muzzle, but don't have one handy – you can fashion one with a leash or some elastic bandage.

## How serious is it?

You will need to make a quick assessment of the seriousness of the injury or illness – does the animal need urgent veterinary attention? If you are not sure, call your local vet clinic for advice.

Injuries that involve ears and eyes, or injuries to pregnant females, or newborn puppies may be more serious than you expect.

Dog fight wounds may not look serious on the surface but can hide significant damage to underlying tissues and are very prone to serious infection.



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You should then decide whether or not you are going to immediately transport the animal to the vets, and if you are then ring ahead to let them know you are coming. If you are not sure, then you should consult your veterinarian for advice.

***Having the contact details of the local vet as well as the local after-hours clinic or emergency centre displayed in a prominent place at home, or stored in your phone is very handy in a situation like this.***

In most cases, the local veterinarian will not be too far away, so getting the animal safely in the car and to the vet should be your number one priority.

Spending a lot of time bandaging, splinting, or dressing an injury is usually a waste of time as the vet will simply remove all of your handy work on arrival, and the animal will have undergone unnecessary pain and stress, and treatment will have been delayed.

That is not to say that keeping a wound clean, keeping a lame leg still, or using pressure to stop bleeding should not be done, but be very conscious about delaying proper veterinary treatment.

## Only a minor injury?

If the injury is not a serious one – you may choose to apply some simple first aid measures yourself. If there is a small wound, you can flush it and then apply a disinfectant such as Betadine™ to the area.

Saline solution (salty water) is safest for flushing and cleaning wounds as it does not sting and is safe if the animal decides to lick the area.

Be very careful about using anything on an animal's skin that would be toxic if put in their mouth as animals are naturally going to lick at an injury, especially things like tea tree oil and eucalyptus oil or Dettol which can be toxic if ingested.

You will still need to document the injury, and any treatment given, and the animal will need to be monitored closely to ensure infection or other complications do not develop.

## Moving an Injured Animal

If you need to transport an injured animal, the aim is to minimise the pain and distress caused by moving injured body parts.

Bring your vehicle as close as possible to the injured animal, and if possible, have someone to help you. Fitting a collar and leash, and even a muzzle, will aid in control and help minimise unnecessary movement. It will also help with restraining the animal in the vehicle – especially in unfamiliar cars, or where your normal car restraints are not available.

If you are dealing with a dog that cannot walk, you may have to gently move it onto a blanket or towel, then use the blanket or towel like a stretcher. Try to move carefully so that you don't make any injuries worse.

***Pro Tip – It is a great idea to teach your dog to wear a muzzle – even if they never need to.***

***By introducing a muzzle in a positive way, and gradually teaching your dog to accept a muzzle, can both reduce their stress if they need to wear one, and can make putting one on in an emergency much safer.***





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## Broken Bones

If your dog is suddenly very lame, or one of its legs does not look right, there could be damage to the bones or ligaments. These injuries usually need an x-ray assessment, so getting the dog to the vet is critical.

Try to minimise the movement of the injured area as movement can be very painful and can lead to further damage of the surrounding tissues. Remember to keep yourself safe, and handle the animal carefully.

## Cuts, Lacerations and Puncture Wounds

Some superficial wounds can be managed at home with gentle cleaning and application of a disinfectant such as Betadine™. However, if the damage looks to be deeper, or the wound is very open, then it will most likely need veterinary assessment and treatment.

Infection can easily cause more problems than the original wound, so early intervention is critical. There is a window of a few hours where early treatment can mean that infection does not have an opportunity to take hold and inflammation is minimised.

If your pet has been in a fight, it's very important you seek veterinary care immediately because bite wounds are highly likely to become infected, and there is often significant damage to underlying tissues that is not visible from the surface.

## Bites and Stings – Allergic Reactions

If your pet suddenly develops swelling of their face, including their muzzle or around their eyes, and/or rashes or bumps (hives) on their body (with or without being very itchy) they may be having an allergic reaction.

Some pets will experience such reactions to insect bites or stings, to new food exposures, or to substances in their environment.

In most cases, allergic reactions are not life threatening, however the pain and discomfort can be significant. Dogs often cause secondary damage trying to rub, bite or lick at irritated areas so a visit to the vet for treatment to reduce the irritation and swelling is advised.

## Vomiting and Diarrhoea

Dogs, especially young puppies, are notorious for chewing on and eating just about anything! In most cases, the high-acid environment in their gut deals with the items they scavenge.

Sometimes, though, the body deals with unwanted items by expelling them from the gut – either by vomiting or moving them through the bowel quickly resulting in diarrhoea.

Of course, there are a LOT of different reasons why a dog may vomit or have loose stools – some more sinister than others. There is a very big difference between '*I ate something that upset my tummy*' and viral gastroenteritis or a bowel obstruction caused by a foreign body.

If your dog has an upset stomach, here is a rough guide:

- » If you have seen your dog eating something it should not have, or suspect it has swallowed something dangerous, you should immediately consult your veterinarian.
- » If the dog looks unwell, is lethargic, or if there is blood visible in the poop or vomit – you should immediately consult a veterinarian.
- » If the dog is otherwise bright and happy, a single vomit or bout of loose poop may not be a concern. However, you will need to watch closely to check that things don't change. Make sure the dog is drinking, and don't offer any food for 6-8 hours.

If they continue to vomit, or have a number of bouts of diarrhoea in this time, you should consult a veterinarian.

If they are acting normally, and there is no recurrence you can then try a small amount of very plain food (such as boiled chicken) as a first meal and continue to monitor their progress over the next few days.



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## Poisons

Pets can accidentally ingest toxic substances such as household cleaners, medications, plants, or human foods that are not suitable for animals.

Depending on the type of poison, the symptoms can vary and might include vomiting, diarrhea, drooling, seizures, or lethargy.

If you suspect your pet has ingested a toxic substance or poison, contact your vet for advice. I

n some cases, your vet may be able to give your pet medication to make them vomit, but in some cases inducing vomiting is not recommended as the poison can cause more damage.

### Australian Animal Poisons Helpline

**1300 869 738**

(9am-5pm)

**This service is free during regular hours, but they do charge a fee for out-of-hours calls.**

**Their website - [animalpoisons.com.au](http://animalpoisons.com.au) offers some excellent advice for pet owners who are concerned their pet has been exposed to a poison or toxic substance.**

## Medications

Never give your pets medication without consulting your vet first, even if they have had that medication before.

Medication that has been prescribed for another animal, or that has been 'left over' from a previous treatment should not be used unless specifically approved and the correct dosage calculated by your vet.

Where a veterinarian has prescribed medication, you need to complete the course fully, even if your pet 'looks better'.

## First Aid Kit for Dogs

As a pet owner, it is a good idea to be prepared. A basic pet first aid kit can be super helpful in an emergency.

Your veterinarian will be able to suggest items for your first aid kit and will be able to show you some simple first aid techniques that you can apply if needed.

A basic first aid kit should contain gloves, saline solution, iodine antiseptic, some gauze swabs, non-adhesive dressings and bandages along with scissors and tweezers.

Having a sturdy blanket or strong towel in the boot of your car can also be a great idea.

## Pet First Aid Training Courses

If you are looking to up your skill level, there are a number of pet first aid courses available in Melbourne through organisations such as [Red Cross](#) and [RSPCA](#).

Your local vet clinic may also offer classes.