Knowing basic pet first aid can save lives
By Lisa Bloch

Our pets rely on us to take care of them when they're sick or injured. But if we're not prepared, panic and confusion can hinder our ability to act effectively when they need us most. The best way to increase your chances of responding quickly and calmly to a pet emergency is to familiarize yourself with basic pet first aid techniques.

"Though never a substitute for veterinary treatment, properly applied first aid can minimize a pet's trauma and even save their life until you are able to transport them to a veterinarian," says Marin Humane Director of Veterinary Services Dr. Belinda Evans.

Proceed with caution
Just like in the safety demonstration on an airplane when they tell you to put the oxygen mask on yourself before helping your kids, it's critical you ensure your safety first when trying to help an injured or sick animal. Before approaching, carefully assess the scene to check for hazards — i.e., electrical wires, traffic, unstable structures, etc. If all looks clear, approach slowly and with caution.

Even the sweetest pet has the potential to bite when injured and scared, so before administering any care, try to muzzle and properly restrain the animal. If necessary, you can make a homemade muzzle on the spot using a piece of cloth. Restraint techniques will depend on the extent and location of injury. It may be dangerous to muzzle an animal that's coughing, vomiting, having trouble breathing or resisting out of fear. In this case, do not attempt treatment on your own.

Check vital signs
The heartbeat of a dog or cat can be felt by laying it down on its right side and placing your hand over its chest, just behind the left elbow. Normal heart rates for dogs average 60 to 160 beats per minute, while cat heart rates average 160 to 220 beats per minute. Pulses may also be measured with your middle and index finger on the inner thigh, just below the wrist and just below the ankle.

You can measure an animal's breathing rate by observing their sides to watch their chest expand. Alternatively, you may hold a tissue in front of the nostrils to see if they move or hold a mirror up to the animal's nose to look for condensation. Normal dog breathing rates are 10 to 30 breaths per minute, while cat breathing rates average 20 to 30 breaths per minute.

Practice measuring vital signs on your healthy pet so you become sensitive to changes that signal a medical emergency.

How to know when it's a true emergency

Difficulty breathing, seizures, excessive bleeding, shock, poisoning, heatstroke, and snake bites are some of the more obvious situations constituting an emergency. But some trauma can be less obvious. Learn what's normal for your pet so you're able to recognize when something is abnormal. Always have the phone number of the nearest emergency veterinarian handy, too. (There are now two 24-hour veterinary hospitals in Marin.) By asking questions over the phone, your vet should be able to tell you whether you need to bring your pet in right away.

The American Veterinary Medical Association offers tips on its website about first aid. You can also learn more at Marin Humane's pet first aid and CPR workshop at 9 a.m. April 5. This hands-on workshop at our Novato campus teaches basic lifesaving techniques and preparedness, including basic pet first aid, CPR training, rescue breathing, restraint and muzzling, choking management, poison response, and much more. A first aid workbook and completion certificate are included. Register at marinhumane.org/events.

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