

Like it or not, the long warm days of summer are coming to an end. Like people, I think animals may have a hard time adjusting to the daylight changes that occur this time of year. Maybe that's why this past two weeks we've seen so many severe trauma cases. Maybe our pets don't appropriately adjust their activities to the ever-shortening days of autumn, and find themselves in harm's way because of late afternoon darkness. Or maybe it's us humans who need to slow down a bit while driving (most severe trauma cases in pets involve altercations with cars) during these fall evenings.

One thing is for sure, the major trauma patient is the one visitor to our office that will get everybody's adrenalin flowing. When the severely injured pet is brought in, it can be an all-consuming process just keeping these patients alive. And sadly, we're not successful with all of them.

The most common cases of severe trauma in pets include animals hit by cars, those attacked by larger animals, those that have fallen or had something fall on them, and sadly, some cases involve foul play or malicious intent.

Hopefully you and your pet will never have to deal with a trauma situation, but understanding some basics of animal trauma medicine could just mean the difference between life and death.

Below are some basic facts we should always keep in mind when dealing with a severely injured animal:

Injured pets will commonly bite

Upon discovering a pet has been severely injured, our first impulse is to pick-up or restrain the animal. This in fact may be a risky thing to do. If injured and painful, the normally docile family pet may uncharacteristically bite anyone who tries move or restrain him. I remember years ago when one of our own doctors ended up in the emergency room herself after being severely bitten in the arm by an injured pet while just trying to move the recumbent dog into a cage.

If at all possible an injured dog should have a muzzle applied securely before trying to move him. A one to two inch wide strip of terry cloth, an old necktie, or old nylon stockings work well as make shift muzzles. Simply encircle the muzzle of the dog with your chosen material and tie it fairly tightly on top. Unless you have a specially designed feline muzzle, injured cats will demand special caution when moving. Usually restraining an injured cat gently but firmly by the scruff (back) of the neck will limit the risk of bite injury. Protecting yourself from an injured and frightened cat's claws is not as easy. Simply wrapping the injured feline in a heavy blanket (a "kitty burrito" as some call it) can also be an effective and safe method of transport.

If the animal is not able to walk or right themselves, damage to the back or spine is a real possibility. As with people, too much movement at this time can worsen a spinal injury. In these cases try to gently slide the pet onto a stretcher made from a flat board or other rigid material. This will reduce the chance of aggravating the injury.

Injured pets will commonly bleed.

This hemorrhage may be visible externally, or it may be internal and not initially evident. If you see a bleeding wound, apply direct firm pressure with clean cloth

material, this will usually suffice until you can get the animal to the veterinarian's office. Internal hemorrhage can be subtle initially but can create serious, life threatening problems hours later. Symptoms of internal hemorrhage may include weakness, pale gum color, trouble breathing, or bloated abdomen to name a few.

Injured pets will commonly have orthopedic problems

Broken bones are part of the picture in many severe trauma cases, but more commonly strained, torn, and bruised soft tissues (ligaments, tendons and muscles) are typically the problem. If the pet will allow it, try to immobilize the injured limb to prevent further injury during transport. On the other hand if the pet resists you handling the injured area it's probably best to just leave it alone. A struggle with the pet to apply a splint or wrap may do more harm than good.

Injured pets will commonly have injured organ systems

The liver, kidneys, bowel, heart and lungs, urinary bladder and central nervous system are all vulnerable to injury. Your veterinarian will use a variety of tests and procedures to assess major organ status after an injury.

Injured pets will usually need a veterinarian.

Whenever an animal sustains a serious injury always have him/her evaluated immediately by a veterinarian. In the moments immediately following an injury internal injuries may not be externally evident, or symptoms of those injuries may not show up until hours, even days, later. The body has a remarkable ability to "hold itself together" in the early moments after trauma, only later does it begin to show the real damage. On several occasions I've seen dogs that have been hit by a car, and other than a few scrapes and bruises, they look remarkably stable on admission-only later to find them in severe respiratory distress from their heavy chest and lung trauma that we couldn't see initially. It's just a good thing we kept those patients in the hospital for observation. Anymore, I recommend a screening chest X-ray of these patients to be sure there will be no surprises later on.

Luckily, most pets will never experience a severe traumatic event. For those unfortunate few that do, a well-prepared owner and timely veterinary care may enable them to live to tell about it.

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