A Matter of Life and Death: Knowing Animal First Aid and CPR Can Save a Pet’s Life

By Merrill Crist-Warchal

Many of us have taken a human CPR and first aid course for either work or for personal reasons. Having the skills to manage emergent events buys time between the onset of the emergency and the arrival at an emergency room. For life-threatening situations, we are able to pick up the phone, dial 911, and then help is at our side within minutes. Unfortunately, that is not the case for our animal companions. We are our pets’ 911. According to the American Animal Hospital Association, one out of four more pets would survive an emergency situation if just one pet first aid technique were applied prior to receiving veterinary care.

Would you know how to handle an animal that is having a seizure? A dog choking? How to ventilate a cat? How to prevent heatstroke? What is a normal temperature for a dog or a cat? How to stop excessive bleeding? Learning how to manage all of these, and more, can help give your pet the best opportunity to have a successful outcome in the event of an emergency.

Responding to an Emergent Situation

Safety First

The first thing to do in an emergency is remain calm. Panicking only escalates the situation. Take a deep breath, collect your thoughts, and begin a systematic survey of the area with the intention of identifying potential dangers. Are you in the midst of traffic? Who is in the immediate, or surrounding, vicinity? Are there environmental hazards?

Once the scene has been secured and any bystanders are safely out of the way, check on the animal. For safety reasons, for yourself and for the animal, see if the animal need to be restrained or muzzled. It is important to remember to never muzzle an animal that is choking, vomiting, having seizures, or having difficulty breathing. And never leave a muzzled animal unattended.

Primary Pet Assessment

After determining the safety at the scene, conduct a primary pet assessment. If there is breathing and a heartbeat, begin first aid. If there is no breathing, but a heartbeat is present, begin rescue breathing. If there is no breathing and no heartbeat, begin CPR. Should obstacles prevent the rendering of care and you cannot safely remove them, remove yourself and the animal instead. If removing the animal is necessary prior to assessing for injury, move with the assumption of cervical injury.

Responding to Heat Stroke in Summer

As summer approaches, it is important to recognize heat stroke. Signs for heat stroke include bright red gums, uncontrollable panting, rapid heart beat, agitation, vomiting, lethargy, and a rectal temperature of 103 degrees or higher. If heat stroke is suspected, move the animal out of the sun and away from the heat. Run cool water over the animal, or apply cool wet cloths to the armpits (axilla), groin, and abdomen. Re-wet cloths often and always use cool water. Plac-
ing the animal on cool soil found underneath mulch can draw away body heat. Wiping rubbing alcohol on paw pads will help decrease internal temperatures. If there is access to air conditioning, use it. Monitor for excessive cooling. Once the temperature has decreased to 102.5 degrees or the animal has stabilized, transport for evaluation. Remember, nothing replaces veterinary care.

**Traveling With Pets and Handling Emergency Situations**

Summer is also a time for summer vacation, and our animal family members are often along for the ride. When traveling with animals, always know the nearest veterinarian and 24-hour animal hospital, as well as directions to each, from where you will be staying.

A pet first aid kit is highly recommended. Such a kit should, minimally, contain the following items: a digital thermometer, blunt-end scissors, thermal blanket, chemical ice pack, cotton gauze pads, medical tape, hydrogen peroxide, diphenhydramine, rubbing alcohol, and antibiotic ointment. Also, consider having Rescue Remedy in your kit to help reduce shock.

Knowing CPR and first aid for animals can mean the difference between life and death. Consider taking a course in your community.

**For more Information:**
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