



FREE GUIDE

Basic pet first aid

What to do in the minutes before you reach a vet

Introduction

Most pet emergencies happen at home, not at the vet's office — which means the first few minutes are usually up to you. First aid doesn't replace veterinary care, but knowing what to do (and what not to do) in that window can genuinely change the outcome. This guide covers the basics every pet parent should know, based on the American Red Cross's pet first aid curriculum and AVMA's emergency-care guidance.

Build a first aid kit before you need one

The AVMA recommends keeping a dedicated kit rather than assembling one during an actual emergency. Keep it somewhere you'd actually grab it in a hurry.

- Important phone numbers: your vet, the nearest emergency vet, and a poison control hotline
- A copy of your pet's medical records
- A digital thermometer
- A muzzle (even a friendly pet may bite when in pain)
- A spare leash and collar
- Gauze roll, clean towels, and nonstick bandages or clean cloth strips
- Self-adhering (vet) tape
- An eye dropper or oral syringe

Know what normal looks like

You can't recognize a problem if you don't know your pet's baseline. Per the Red Cross and veterinary emergency references, a normal resting heart rate is roughly 60–140 beats per minute for dogs (smaller dogs run faster, larger dogs slower) and 160–220 for cats. Normal temperature for both is about 100–102.5°F. Gums should be pink, and capillary refill time (press a gum gently, release, and time how long the color takes to return) should be 1–2 seconds — longer than that can signal poor circulation or shock.

Choking

A choking pet paws at their mouth, makes distressed sounds while breathing, or coughs persistently; lips or tongue may look blue-tinged. If your pet can still breathe at all, keep them calm and get to a vet immediately rather than intervening. If you can safely open the mouth and see an object, the AVMA describes using two hands to open the mouth and your fingers to remove it — but only if you can do so without risking a bite or pushing the object further in.

Bleeding

Apply firm, direct pressure with a clean cloth or towel over the wound. The AVMA's guidance is specific here: hold pressure for at least three minutes before checking whether it's stopped, and

if blood soaks through, add more layers on top rather than removing the original cloth — lifting it can disturb a clot that's just started to form.

Seizures

Don't try to restrain your pet or put anything in their mouth. Clear the immediate area of anything they could injure themselves on, gently guide them away from stairs or furniture edges if possible, and time the seizure. Afterward, keep them warm and quiet and contact your vet — especially if it lasted more than a few minutes, if there's more than one in a day, or if it's their first.

When it's an emergency, not a wait-and-see

Call your vet, an emergency animal hospital, or a poison control hotline immediately for: seizures, loss of consciousness, difficulty breathing, suspected poisoning, severe or uncontrolled bleeding, a bloated or distended abdomen, inability to urinate, or any injury involving the eyes. When in doubt, call and describe what you're seeing — a real emergency line would rather field an unnecessary call than have you wait on a genuine one.

First aid readiness checklist

- ☐ First aid kit assembled and stored somewhere you'd actually grab it
- ☐ Vet, emergency vet, and poison control numbers saved in your phone, not just written down
- ☐ Know your pet's normal heart rate, temperature, and gum color
- ☐ Know the 3-minute rule for bleeding and not to remove a soaked cloth
- ☐ Know not to restrain a seizing pet or put anything in their mouth
- ☐ Know the signs that mean 'call now,' not 'wait and see'

Summary

First aid buys time, not a diagnosis — knowing your pet's normal vitals, having a kit ready, and knowing the handful of things to do (and not do) for choking, bleeding, and seizures covers most of what actually happens before you can reach a vet. If your pet isn't breathing and has no pulse, see our CPR guide next. If you're not sure whether what you're seeing counts as an emergency at all, our emergency checklist tool walks through the same red flags in under a minute — and our guide to what actually happens at an emergency vet visit covers the part after you arrive.

This guide is for general education only and is not a substitute for advice from a certified trainer, veterinarian, or veterinary behaviorist. If you're seeing signs of distress, aggression, or a sudden change in behavior, please consult

a professional who can assess your pet directly.