

Here's Help to Save Your Pet if Choking

When this happens (and it can happen to any cat or dog), you want nothing more than to help your pet in distress, but it's often impossible to know the cause. If you know the five most common causes, you'll have a better idea of what you need to do to successfully save your pet's life.

Reviewed by **Dr. Becker**

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- There are five basic hazards that can cause choking in cats and dogs, and knowing them could be lifesaving if you ever find yourself dealing with a beloved pet that's choking, and even prevent such situations altogether
- It's often not a large piece of some foreign object that can cause a choking problem in your pet; in fact, it's usually something just small enough to fit in the back of their throat and cut off their air supply
- If your dog or cat is choking but can still breathe, take him or her immediately to the nearest veterinary emergency center, and if they're unable to breathe, use chest compression methods, aka the Heimlich maneuver for pets
- Asthma, collapsing trachea and kennel cough are just three of the disorders your pet may have that may cause them to choke and otherwise indicate they're experiencing a problem
- Small dogs who are past their prime may be susceptible to collapsing trachea. Unfortunately, there's no cure for the condition as yet, but if your vet has told you your dog has this disorder, there are precautions you can take to lessen the impact

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Anyone who's ever had a dog or cat knows they can scare you when certain noises or their behavior makes it evident they're choking. Sometimes it's not altogether clear what caused the problem — you just know you want to help immediately. While a foreign object is often a cause, it's not the only thing that can cause problems. There are five basic and quite common hazards that can cause choking in both cats and dogs.¹

This information could be lifesaving if you ever find yourself dealing with a beloved pet that's choking, and may in fact help you to prevent such situations altogether. Whether it's part of a shoe, a chunk from a table leg or a tiny piece of a child's toy, both cats and dogs sometimes very literally bite off more than they can chew. Obviously, some objects can be more dangerous than others, whether it's a splinter of wood or bone, or a balloon that could be either toxic or large enough to cut off their airway (or both).

Foreign Objects

It's usually not even a large piece that can cause a problem; in fact, it's usually a small object that's just small enough to fit in the back of their throat. Many items that may be safe at first, like a rawhide bone or some other toy, because smaller and smaller when they're gnawed on long enough and at that point become cause for concern. Bottom line, if an object is of a size that can get stuck in the animal's windpipe, it can be life-threatening.

A good rule of thumb is that if you give your dog an edible chew, tendon or rawhide (which is not recommended), remain in the same vicinity to keep them under supervision. Once the object becomes small enough that only an inch sticks out both sides of your dog's mouth then throw it out.

Something you should be aware of, though, is that no matter how long you've built a relationship of trust between you and your pet, and no matter how docile they may be on an ordinary day, all bets are off if you try to retrieve something stuck in your pet's mouth. As harrowing as the situation may be, remember to remain calm.

PetMD advises that if your dog can still breathe, take him or her to the nearest veterinarian or veterinary emergency center immediately, and if they're unable to breathe, use chest compression methods to remove the item. Depending on the animal's size, the procedure is different, as explained in this **Heimlich maneuver for pets** article on how it's done. However:

*"If your dog passes out, then and only then should you open the mouth and see if you can remove the item. Use both hands to open the mouth, and grasp the upper jaw while pressing the lips over the dog's teeth so they are between the teeth and your fingers. Look inside your dog's mouth and remove the obstruction if possible. If you can't remove the object, try using a flat spoon to pry it out of the dog's mouth."*²

As for cats, string, yarn, ribbon, fishing line and even thread is hard to resist, and they can chew on any of the above until it becomes wrapped around their tongue. The only smart way to avoid such a problem is to keep such things out of their reach. Toys with questionable items attached should be put where they can't cause a problem until you can watch them.

A whole 'nother ball of wax is introduced with electrical cords, a temptation for dogs as well as cats, and the implications become obvious very quickly. The possibility of electrocution may not cause a choking hazard, but the result could be just as final. But another possibility you may not be aware of is pulmonary edema, caused by a buildup of fluid in the animal's lungs, which can restrict oxygen exchange. Again, be aware of the possibility and keep an eye on your pets.

Feline Asthma

Speaking of cats, asthma can cause your pet to hack, cough, choke or exhibit labored breathing as a result of a blocked airway. Being a disease caused by an allergy brought on by something in their environment, such as pollen or dust mites, feline asthma is considered a chronic inflammatory condition for which there is no cure. However, talk to your integrative veterinarian, who can suggest methods to prevent this scenario.

Eliminating triggers, cleaning up kitty's environment and diet, and a natural anti-inflammatory protocol can dramatically improve symptoms and reduce the amount of drugs needed to manage your cat's asthma.

Collapsing Trachea

Small dogs who are past their prime may also be susceptible to collapsing trachea, which is a common condition that can bring about choking in your pet. More specifically, the C-shaped windpipe connecting their nose and mouth with the lungs is made up of cartilage.

Perhaps it's related to old age, but this area can become "floppy," and the harder the animal works to breathe in, the flatter it becomes, somewhat like a straw when you're enjoying a thick shake. Unfortunately, there's no cure for the condition as yet, but if your vet has told you your dog has this disorder, there are precautions you can take to lessen the impact.

First, keep your dog's weight in check, because when they're overweight, it seems to automatically exacerbate the problem. In addition, make sure you don't allow them to fend for themselves in excessive heat, because it causes them to pant harder. If you notice them struggling at times, you might talk to your vet about prescribing a cough medicine for them. Cartilage-building supplements may also be given to maintain the integrity of tracheal cartilage.

Infectious Disease

You may have heard of kennel cough, but suffice it to say the condition involves a respiratory disease, and it's also known as tracheobronchitis. Rather than being one specific problem, it's also referred to as a "catch-all" for a number of infectious organisms. Further, it's similar to a human who catches a cold when someone gets sneezed on — it's easily passed between dogs; sometimes because an infected dog coughs up phlegm that other dogs sniff.

Dogs with kennel cough don't just cough; they often hack loudly as if something's stuck in their throat, or spit up foam. Most cases of kennel cough resolve on their own without medical intervention. The best protection against a kennel cough infection is a healthy, balanced immune system.

Another condition with an alarming name is known as puppy strangles, aka juvenile cellulitis, a nodular and pustular skin disorder with no known cause that strikes young dogs between the ages of three weeks and four months, and causes symptoms like the flu as well as swollen throat and lymph nodes.³

Constricting Collars

This problem is completely preventable and, frankly, should never happen. However, depending on the design of the collar your cat or dog might be wearing, it's possible for it to constrict rather like a seatbelt that gets tighter when the wearer moves or when the dog or cat strains against their leash. Especially in fast-growing kittens and pups, it can seem like a remarkably short period of time since you worried about whether your pet's collar might be too loose or too tight.

Just make sure you check the tightness of collars frequently, not just when they're young and growing, because they might catch the collar on something that pulls it tighter accidentally.

In order to avoid this particular choking hazard, you should be able to place two fingers snugly inside the collar while it's being worn and in this way ensure the collar is just the right fit. If straining against their collar because of your pet's eagerness to get ahead of himself becomes a continual problem, it's possible that additional training would be in order.

However, use either a head collar or no-pull harness to avoid tracheal and cervical neck injuries in dogs that regularly pull on their leash in any way.

Sources and References

^{1,2,3} [PetMD](#), June 17, 2024.
