

19 Red Flag Symptoms That Silently Scream, 'True Pet Emergency'

Is it urgent or can it wait? These 19 symptoms silently scream warnings to get your pet help now, not tomorrow. Dogs and cats in the wild hide pain to mask vulnerability. So the symptoms you see may be just the tip of the iceberg. And your speed could save their life.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- When your pet is ill or hurt, it can be difficult to determine how serious the situation is and whether you should seek emergency veterinary care
- There are several true emergencies that require immediate veterinary intervention, including severe bleeding, exposed bone, seizures, signs of poisoning and others
- In the urgent (do not ignore) category are signs of extreme fatigue in a pet, fever and red eyes
- Conditions you can typically safely care for at home include minor cuts and scrapes, and bleeding nails
- In between veterinary visits, it's a good idea to keep an eye on your pet's health with regular at-home wellness exams

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Sometimes when furry family members get sick or injured, it's hard to decide on the best course of action. On the one hand, you want to spare your dog or cat a stressful and unnecessary (and costly) veterinary visit. But on the other hand, what if you take a wait-and-see approach and your pet takes a turn for the worse?

If your pet is showing signs of distress, it's important to keep in mind that dogs and cats are prey for larger animals in the wild, and are programmed by Mother Nature to hide pain and other signs of vulnerability. That means the symptoms your pet allows you to see are often just the tip of the iceberg.

Pet Emergencies That Require Immediate Veterinary Care

The 19 medical conditions, symptoms and situations below warrant emergency veterinary attention. This isn't an all-inclusive list, but if you notice any of the following, get your pet to an emergency veterinary clinic immediately.

1. Severe bleeding or bleeding that doesn't stop within five minutes
2. Choking, difficulty breathing or nonstop coughing and gagging
3. Bleeding from nose, mouth, rectum, coughing up blood, or blood in urine
4. Inability to urinate or pass feces (stool), or obvious pain associated with urinating or passing stool

5. Eye injuries
6. You suspect or know your pet has eaten something poisonous (e.g., antifreeze, xylitol, chocolate, rodent poisoning, etc.)
7. Seizures or staggering
8. Fractured bones, severe lameness or inability to move leg(s)
9. Obvious signs of pain or extreme anxiety
10. Heat stress or heatstroke
11. Severe vomiting or diarrhea — more than two episodes in a 24-hour period, or either of these combined with obvious illness or any of the other problems listed here
12. Refusal to drink for 24 hours or more
13. Unconsciousness
14. Fever over 104 degrees F (40 degrees C) with profound lethargy
15. Burns or injuries in which a bone is exposed
16. Symptoms of bloat, including a very distended abdomen, unproductive belching, retching or vomiting, abdominal pain, restlessness, shallow, rapid breathing and pale gums
17. Penetrating wounds to the chest, including deep lacerations or punctures
18. Bulging eyes and sudden blindness
19. Loss of balance (inability to right herself or falls over due to inability to maintain balance)

Symptoms That Should Never Be Ignored

The following is a list of five symptoms that fall into the category of "Do Not Ignore." They may or may not mean your pet is seriously sick, but should be investigated as soon as possible by your veterinarian.

1. **Lethargy or extreme fatigue** — A lethargic pet will appear drowsy, "lazy" and/or indifferent. She may be slow to respond to sights, sounds and other stimuli in her environment. Lethargy or exhaustion is a nonspecific symptom that can signal a number of potential underlying disorders, including some that are serious or life-threatening. If your pet is lethargic for longer than 24 hours, it's time to make an appointment with your veterinarian.
2. **Coughing** — Coughing in pets, unless it's a one-and-done situation, generally indicates an underlying problem. Examples include a possible windpipe obstruction, kennel cough, asthma, bronchitis, pneumonia, heartworm disease, heart failure and tumors of the lung. All causes of coughing require investigation, and in most cases, treatment.
3. **Fever** — If your pet's temperature spikes, it usually means his body is fighting an infection. The normal temperature in both dogs and cats is 100.5 to 102.5 degrees F. If your pet feels warm to you and his temp is higher than normal, make an appointment with your veterinarian.
4. **Loss of appetite and/or weight loss** — Often, loss of appetite is the very first sign of an underlying illness in pets. There can be many reasons your dog or cat isn't hungry or refuses to eat, but not eating can begin to negatively impact his health within 24 hours. And for puppies and kittens 6 months or younger, the issue is even more serious.

Weight loss is the result of a negative caloric balance, and it can be the consequence of anorexia (loss of appetite) or when an animal's body uses or eliminates essential dietary nutrients faster than they are replenished. Weight loss exceeding 10% of your pet's normal body weight will be a red flag for your vet. There can be several underlying causes, some of which are very serious.

5. **Red eye(s)** — If the white area of your pet's eye turns bright red, it's a sign of inflammation or infection that signals one of several diseases involving the external eyelids, the third eyelid, the conjunctiva, cornea or sclera of the eye. Redness can also point to inflammation of structures inside the eye, eye socket disorders and also glaucoma. Certain disorders of the eye can lead to blindness, so any significant change in the appearance of your pet's eyes should be investigated.

Conditions You Can Safely Take Care of at Home

At the other end of the spectrum from conditions requiring emergency or urgent vet care are those you can safely handle at home. These include:

- **Minor nail bleeding** — If your pet snags a nail on the carpet or you clip one too short, dip the nail in styptic powder to stop the bleeding. You can also use cornstarch or flour; simply pour some in a bowl, dip the nail in and apply constant pressure (usually one to five minutes) until the bleeding stops.
- **Minor cuts and scrapes** — You can use contact lens saline solution to clean dirt and debris from a cut or scrape on your pet's body. You can also use this solution to flush sand or other debris from his eyes. Disinfect daily with dilute Betadine (povidone iodine solution) and apply colloidal silver, calendula tincture or manuka honey to superficial abrasions until they heal.
- **Foot soaks** — Itchy, inflamed or irritated paws can often be soothed by giving your pet a foot soak in a solution of water mixed with povidone iodine (brand name Betadine). Add enough iodine to turn the water the color of iced tea. Soaking your pet's paws in this solution will safely disinfect and soothe them while removing irritants. Be aware that this solution may stain white fur a darker shade.

In between veterinary visits, it's a good idea to keep an eye on your pet's health with regular at-home wellness exams. If you notice any unusual lumps, sores or areas that seem painful, bring them to your veterinarian's attention.

Sources and References

[AVMA.org](https://www.avma.org)
