

Relax? Or Hit the Panic Button When You See This in Your Pet

One of the best ways to spot serious medical conditions is to observe signs and symptoms in your body, or your pet's body. If your pet shows any of these symptoms, please do not ignore them. Because early action truly could save your pet's life.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- When your pet isn't feeling well, it can be difficult to decide whether to wait for her symptoms to pass, or hit the panic button
- The choice is made more difficult because some symptoms can signal both a mild, transient illness or a life-threatening disorder
- There are 10 symptoms you should never ignore, because a wait-and-see approach is just not worth the risk
- Coughing in pets, unless it's a one-and-done situation, generally indicates an underlying problem
- If your pet's temperature spikes, it usually means his body is fighting an infection

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When your cat just Ain't Doing Right (ADR) or your dog seems a little off his game, it can be difficult to know whether to take a wait-and-see attitude, or tuck your pet into his carrier and head to the nearest veterinary clinic. This is especially true when your furry family member's symptoms are commonly seen in disorders at both ends of the spectrum, from benign to life-threatening.

To offer you some guidance, here's a list of symptoms that fall into the category of "Do Not Ignore." They may or may not mean your pet is seriously sick, but they should be investigated right away by your veterinarian or an emergency animal clinic.

10 'Do Not Ignore' Symptoms in Dogs and Cats

1. **Fainting, collapsing** — When an animal collapses, it means she has suffered a sudden loss of strength that causes her to fall and be unable to get back up. If a collapsed pet also loses consciousness, she has fainted. Either of these situations is an emergency, even if your pet recovers quickly and seems normal again within seconds or minutes of the collapse.

All the reasons for fainting or collapsing are serious and require an immediate visit to your veterinarian. They include a potential problem with the nervous system (brain, spinal cord or nerves), the musculoskeletal system (bones, joints, muscles), the circulatory system (heart, blood vessels, blood) or the respiratory system (mouth, nose, throat, lungs).

2. **Difficulty breathing** — A dog or kitty in respiratory distress will have labored breathing or shortness of breath that can occur when he breathes in or out. Breathing difficulties can mean that not enough oxygen is reaching his tissues. Additionally, pets with heart failure may not be able to pump enough blood to their muscles and other tissues.

Respiratory distress often goes hand-in-hand with a buildup of fluid in the lungs or chest cavity that leads to shortness of breath and coughing. If your pet has sudden undiagnosed breathing problems, he should see a veterinarian immediately.

3. **Bloody diarrhea, urine or vomit** — Digested blood in your pet's poop will appear as black tarry stools. Fresh blood in the stool indicates bleeding in the colon or rectum. Either situation is cause for concern and should be investigated as soon as possible. Blood in the urine, called hematuria, can be obvious or microscopic. There are a number of serious disorders that can cause bloody urine, including a blockage in the urinary tract, a bacterial infection and even cancer.

Vomited blood can be either bright red (fresh), or resemble coffee grounds (indicating partially digested blood). There are a variety of reasons your pet might vomit blood, some of which are relatively minor, but others are serious and even life threatening.

4. **Trouble urinating** — This includes discomfort while urinating, straining to urinate and frequent attempts to urinate with little success. If your pet cries out while relieving himself, seems preoccupied with that area of his body or is excessively licking the area, you should make an appointment with your veterinarian right away. There are several underlying causes of urinary difficulties, some of which can result in death within just a few days.

5. **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.

6. **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.

7. **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 non-specific 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.

8. **Pacing, restlessness or unproductive retching** — When a pet paces and seems unable or unwilling to settle down, it can signal that he's in pain, discomfort or distress. One very serious condition in dogs in which these symptoms are common is gastric dilatation volvulus (GDV), also called bloat. Bloat is a life-threatening condition that most often occurs in large breed dogs and those with deep chests.

9. **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.

10. **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.

Some symptoms of illness in cats and dogs are best handled by simply giving them a chance to run their course, for example, a temporary gastrointestinal (GI) upset resulting from indiscriminate snacking. Other symptoms can be so sudden, severe and frightening that you know immediately you need to get your pet to the vet or an emergency animal hospital.

The 10 symptoms listed above can fall somewhere in the middle, so hopefully these will provide you with some good info in the event your four-legged family member develops symptoms that point to a severe or life-threatening illness.

Sources and References

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