

How to Assist a Pet That Is Unable to Rise and Walk

BACKGROUND

After surgery, injury, or as a result of illness, a pet may be unable to stand and walk normally. These dogs and cats need help to do so, especially to urinate or defecate. Movement also provides some physical activity to stay limber. It is important, whenever possible, to help a dog or cat in this condition stand and walk as painlessly as possible, and some ways for doing this are described here. The goal is to help a pet recover or at least maintain a functional amount of physical mobility.

GETTING STARTED

For large dogs, make or purchase a sling that is long enough to fit under the dog's abdomen (belly) and that you can hold comfortably in both hands when the dog is standing. The length of the sling will depend on the size of the dog. A longer sling will be needed for a dog with shorter legs. For any size dog, a sling that is too short can force you to bend over to grasp the ends securely and support the weight of the pet with your back, which is not recommended, simply from an ergonomic standpoint for yourself. Ideally, you should be standing upright with a straight back, sling ends in each hand and supporting the majority of the weight of the dog through the strength in your legs, knees slightly bent.

In many cases a sling can be fashioned from a towel or sheet. For dogs that are experiencing generalized weakness or difficulty using all four legs, two holes can be cut into these, one for each front leg, to provide a more balanced support for the pet when walking. For this type of support, when the person is carrying most of the weight of the pet, especially with larger dogs, two people may be required (one on either side, each holding one end of the sling).

To assist a pet who is weak in the hind end and attempting to rise using the front legs, it is helpful to provide secure, nonslip footing such as a rubberized carpeted mat. Hardwood floors and linoleum are slippery; a better, higher-traction surface (covering an area at least twice the length of the pet, square) can make all the difference in helping a pet to rise.

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

Above all, it is essential to protect yourself. Especially with heavy dogs, the process of lifting or carrying can be strenuous, and it is important to prevent back injuries or other similar problems in the caretaker (i.e., you and anyone helping you). Some pets may feel pain or discomfort and may respond by biting, so a muzzle should be placed over the mouth/snout if this is a risk associated with the type of injury or disorder your pet has.

Be sure that sufficient traction is available. Placing just a towel or blanket over a smooth floor for a pet to stand on is rarely useful because the cloth just slides on the floor under a pet's scrambling feet. A better choice is to obtain an area rug or section of carpet on which your pet can lie and then have traction to help stand up.

With male dogs in particular, it is important to place a sling in such a way that it does not impede their ability to urinate. Try to support the weight of the pet farther forward on the body by having the sling about halfway between their shoulders and hips so the penis is not trapped in the sling. It may be unavoidable to keep the sling from becoming soiled. Be sure to make two slings, or purchase one that can easily be washed and dried.

Homemade slings may bunch up at the back, just ahead of the hips. Practice keeping the sling stretched flat and spread forward underneath the abdomen and chest, as if supporting your pet's

underside with a miniature hammock. This helps spread out the support and is much more comfortable on the abdomen; it is easier to do on stocky or long-bodied dogs (bulldogs, dachshunds) and harder with very deep-chested dogs like greyhounds.

PROCEDURE FOR ASSISTING YOUR PET AT HOME

For larger dogs, place the sling under the dog's abdomen (belly) when he/she is lying down. If the front legs are healthy and strong, encourage him or her to rise into a sitting position. If this is successful, you can then slip the sling under the belly and, lifting the hips, back, and hind legs from both sides, help your dog into a normal standing posture. This can be done with one person only or with two people, one on each side, especially for heavy dogs. Adjust the sling, if necessary, to spread it out under the abdomen and chest. It may be helpful to have a second person lead the dog using a collar and leash. This will make it clear to the dog what is going on and where you wish him/her to go. Avoid stairs if at all possible. If stairs cannot be avoided and a dog is too large to carry, then a second person can help a great deal by supporting part of the weight of the dog at the shoulders with a second sling between the front legs to avoid stumbling and falling.

Especially when dogs or cats have injuries to the back, it may be mandatory to avoid stairs for their protection. If there are stairs in your home that a pet will have to use, please discuss this with your veterinarian in advance to search out an alternative (e.g., staying on the ground floor or finding another place to stay during recovery).

For cats and small dogs, the process is easier because they can be picked up with less effort, and a sling becomes unnecessary. If your pet is unable to stand up on his/her own, you should do so, carrying him or her outside (dogs), to the litter box (cats), or wherever is appropriate for urination and defecation. The best way to pick up a cat or small dog is with one hand around the front (just ahead of the front legs, picking up the neck and chest) and one hand around the hind end (behind the back legs) and holding the pet against your chest in a gentle "bear-hug" embrace. This should be comfortable for your pet and for you; if not, you should review your approach with a veterinary technician and determine whether a different technique is necessary (see above).

When a dog is attempting to urinate or defecate, it may be impossible for him/her to posture in the usual way. You can help by providing support with a sling (or by holding the whole body if a cat or small dog) in a fairly normal posture that allows for bodily functions to occur. For example, most dogs and cats can relieve themselves in a crouching—almost sitting—position. Helping a dog or cat into this position—through holding, bracing a large dog's feet with your own feet alongside them if the ground outside is slippery, and so on—may allow the pet to evacuate the bowels and bladder appropriately. This should be done at least every morning and night.

AFTERWARDS

Hygiene is essential for preventing infections, and a dog or cat that does not have good bowel or bladder control should be kept especially clean when physical mobility is reduced. The longer periods of time spent in one position make the skin and tissues more prone to irritation and infection. This may mean cleaning the skin and hair with a wet towel and then drying (sponge bath), or a full bath to fully clean any soiled areas. This may best be done at the veterinary hospital and should be discussed with your veterinarian as a way of maintaining your dog or cat's quality of life.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How often should I do this?

Dogs and cats that are not able to stand and move adequately should have help to do so at least every 8-12 hours and preferably more, unless doing so is painful. Other exceptions include medical conditions where this would be detrimental or situations where doing so poses a risk to you or your pet. The specific timing and extent of assistance is something you should discuss with your veterinarian.

Is there anything else I should be doing?

Depending on medical status, your pet may benefit from range-of-motion exercises, which also should be discussed with your veterinarian (see separate handout).

OTHER RELATED INFORMATION SHEETS

- [How to Perform Range-of-Motion Exercises](#)
- [How to Provide Bandage Care and Upkeep at Home](#)

Practice Stamp or Name & Address

Also available in Spanish.