

How to Provide General Postoperative Care at Home, Especially Lifting or Picking Up a Pet, and Pain Control

BACKGROUND

There are several aspects of immediate postoperative recovery that can make the difference between a quick, easy return to health or delays, complications, and an unhappy pet and family. In addition to caring for the surgical incision, there are many things you can do to promote a more rapid recovery for your pet after surgery. These include careful techniques for lifting the pet, providing a comfortable place for the pet to recover from surgery, and exercise restriction.

GETTING STARTED

For some surgeries, veterinarians will prescribe pain medication for your pet's postoperative recovery. Be aware that careful handling (when picking up or assisting your pet to stand) is still necessary to avoid causing pain. Some stronger pain medications can cause drowsiness, and you should be vigilant with regard to stairs, vehicles in traffic, and other hazards if your dog or cat is receiving pain medication that may decrease alertness (and risk a fall, being struck by car, or other causes of injuries that a sedated, recovering animal simply is not aware of). Additionally, your pet will need to rest after surgery. Even if your pet seems to be recovering quickly and wants to run soon after, a period of restricted exercise is recommended after virtually all surgical procedures. The type of surgery (simple versus extensive) will dictate the level of care and length of care necessary. In general, most straightforward surgeries of the skin (e.g., removal of a growth on the skin) heal in 10-14 days, as do elective surgeries like spaying and neutering. Surgeries inside the chest and orthopedic (bone/joint) surgeries may take several weeks of recuperation.

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

In general, if your pet normally spends time indoors, it is best to continue this for the duration of recovery, allowing brief on-leash walks outside for urination and defecation. Usually, staying indoors is the easiest way to control the cleanliness and temperature of a recovering dog or cat's environment, as well as limiting the level of exercise. If your pet is normally strictly outdoors, consider relocation inside or into a clean, protected outdoor area for the duration of recovery. If you are using a garage for this purpose, it is important to be sure that your pet is not exposed to ethylene glycol (antifreeze), rodenticides (mouse bait/rat poison), or other dangerous chemicals that may normally be stored there.

PROCEDURE FOR POSTOPERATIVE HOME CARE

When lifting a pet that has had surgery, it is best to start by assessing the pet's pain level. Some overt signs to watch for include refusal to move on his/her own, flattening or pointing the ears backward, groaning, baring the teeth, or growling when you approach. More subtle signs indicating possible internal pain include hiding (cats), refusing food or water, avoiding eye contact, or having a hunched posture when standing. If your pet appears to be in severe pain or if your pet is known to nip or bite, use an appropriately sized muzzle (restraining device placed over the snout) if it becomes necessary to lift your pet. Further detail is available in a separate information sheet (see below).

To lift a large dog, one good option is to use a towel or bedsheet as a sling running across the underside of the abdomen (belly).

Ideally, two people are involved, one to lift each end of the sling and elevate the hindquarters; the dog should have a surface with good traction and should attempt to stand. With this assistance, standing and walking are possible.

To lift a small to medium-sized dog, place one arm under his/her hind end or pelvis (as if your pet could sit down in the crook of your elbow), and wrap the other arm in front of the chest and shoulders. This can be described as a gentle "bear hug." If your pet is slightly too heavy for this approach, slipping the second arm under the chest can provide additional support, provided it is not strenuous or risky for your own back/health.

To lift a very small pet such as a small dog or a cat, place one hand under the pelvis (hips, hind end below the tail), cupping the hind end with your hand, and place one hand in front of the shoulders or under the chest.

These approaches to lifting are ideal for patients with abdominal incisions, leg injuries, head and neck injuries, and most other wounds on their trunk (abdomen and back). For a dog that has had back surgery, the techniques described above may or may not be appropriate depending on the nature of the surgery. You should ask your veterinarian to review and demonstrate a correct approach (providing maximal support to the spine) with you prior to discharging your pet from the hospital.

Keeping your pet in a warm, clean, comfortable, and protected area (from weather extremes and from other animals) allows your pet a quiet opportunity to rest without the need to move excessively. A soft bed on the floor in an area of the house that can be gated off may suffice (to keep the patient in and other pets out). For pets that have had more serious injury or surgery, when strict exercise restriction is imperative, keeping your pet in an airline kennel or other approved pet cage may be required to avoid wrong movements or self-harm. Under any of these circumstances, a minimum of two sessions of standing (with assistance) and walking should be planned every day. See [Other Related Information Sheets](#), below. Cats are often much smaller than dogs, so it may be necessary for your cat to have more space, such as a room of his/her own. Cats often need a quiet area without any competition with other pets for food, water, or the litter box during their recovery. Many cats appreciate having a hiding place, like an empty cardboard box, to hide in, and you should cut a hole in the side of the box so the cat can enter and leave easily.

In general, exercise restriction for dogs includes short on-leash walks for the purpose of urination and defecation. This means restriction from using the stairs, running, jumping (in and out of cars/trucks, on and off your bed and couch/other chairs) and playing, even if your pet appears to be recovering very quickly.

The appetite can return quickly or only gradually after surgery. In most cases, the first meal should be 12 hours or so after surgery. It is wise to offer a small portion (1/4 the usual amount), because having had food withheld prior to surgery means eating a full meal could be excessive and cause nausea. Passage of food from the stomach into the intestines can be expected to be done in 3-6 hours, at which time another quarter-meal can be given. This can be repeated for a total of four quarter-meals to finish the day's feedings. Then the regular feeding schedule resumes the next day.

AFTERWARDS

Depending on the type of surgery, recommendations for exercise restriction will vary widely from 1 week to several months. Contact your veterinarian for recommendations specific to your pet's surgery.

Several types of surgical interventions, such as eye surgery, heart surgery, and others, require special monitoring. Please ask your veterinarian if any special monitoring is recommended.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

My pet hasn't had a bowel movement for 24 hours since surgery. Is there a problem?

No, this is essentially always normal. During recovery, a pet usually has a decreased appetite. When he/she eats less, there will be less of a need to defecate. Furthermore, most surgeries are preceded by a period of fasting (withholding food), which further reduces the need to defecate. However, it is important to monitor for a progressive return to his/her normal appetite and passing normal urine and stools over 24-48 hours postoperatively. If your pet continues to have a poor appetite, this may be due to a problem such as inadequate pain management. Contact your veterinarian to discuss these concerns.

Are there any vitamins or supplements I should give my dog or cat to help with recovery?

This is a highly controversial area, with many companies selling products that make promises of accelerated recovery based on testimonials, hearsay evidence, and information that is simply unsupported. With a balanced diet and ongoing treatment of any concurrent medical concerns or illnesses, no specific supplementation should be necessary.

OTHER RELATED INFORMATION SHEETS

- [How to Monitor a Surgical Incision During Healing](#)
- [How to Provide Bandage Care and Upkeep at Home](#)
- [How to Assist a Pet That Is Unable to Rise and Walk](#)
- [How to Assemble and Use an Elizabethan Collar](#)

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