

Emergency Medical Care

Does My Exotic Pet Need Emergency Medical Care?

Are you home with your exotic pet and noticing something is wrong? Are you wondering if you need to go to an emergency room or if it can wait till the morning? Are you wondering if there is anything you can do at home? The following document will help answer some of these confusing, often frightening, topics.

If, after reading this, you feel your pet cannot wait until the morning for medical care, please call the Veterinary Emergency Group (VEG) 212-223-3500 located at 1215 2nd Ave (64th st). Our vets consult with the vets at VEG for cases requiring specialized care. They are open from 6PM- 8AM. The emergency vets you will see after hours have been educated on how to manage common exotic pet emergencies and they can provide supportive care until the next day when they will have your pet transferred to us if further care is required.

You should contact and/or go directly to VEG after hours if your pet is suffering from one of the following serious emergency medical conditions. If your pet is sick, but not in immediate danger, it may be better to wait until an exotics specialist is available the next day.

Exotic Small Mammal Emergencies

NOT EATING: The most common medical emergency for rabbits, guinea pigs, and chinchillas is anorexia: not eating for over 24-hours. This urgent condition is considered even more serious if the pet is also not defecating. Usually, this is accompanied by lethargy, sedentary behavior, and sometimes a noticeably distended abdomen. These animals require urgent medical care and should be seen after hours at VEG.

It is our recommendation that owners do not force feed these animals or give any sort of over-the-counter medication. Force feeding an animal without knowing why they stopped eating can be dangerous.

We do not recommend giving pineapple juice or any sort of fruit in order to “treat hairballs” (as seen on the internet) or entice them to eat a sweet under the assumption that eating something sweet is better than nothing. Sugary foods are disruptive to the stomach and intestinal flora in healthy herbivores. Giving sugary foods to a sick herbivore is even more harmful, as the gut is already in distress and sugar will compound the problem.

TRAUMA: If your exotic small mammal has been injured, it may be able to wait until the morning.

Most bleeding from a wound can be stopped by applying gentle pressure for 2-3 minutes. Bleeding from a toenail can be stopped by applying styptic powder, cornstarch, or flour. Most of these superficial wounds will clot and do not require immediate attention.

If your pet is dragging a leg, severely limping, or has a potential broken bone, this may or may not be able to wait. If they are willing to eat, drink, defecate, and rest comfortably, it may be best to wait until an exotics vet is available during business hours. Keep him/her caged and quiet until you are able to get them to an exotics vet. If the pet is visibly in shock, not willing to eat, unable to move or get comfortable, they should be taken to the VEG for supportive care and pain management.

We strongly discourage owners from giving any over-the-counter pain management such as aspirin or acetaminophen to any pets, as most of these agents are toxic and/or very harmful to the delicate gastrointestinal tract of herbivores.

RESPIRATORY DISTRESS: Severe respiratory distress can be a real emergency. A true respiratory emergency is one that happens quickly, not one that has been slowly, for days, becoming a problem. A small exotic animal that was fine all day but then starts to have severe trouble breathing at night may be having heat stroke, may have aspirated something, or may be suffering some sort of cardiac episode. If you see your rabbit or small exotic mammal open mouth breathing, you should take them to the Animal Medical Center for overnight care.

SEIZURES: Seizures can be life threatening, particularly in pet ferrets. In general, the seizure is not the real threat, it's the underlying cause that is the most dangerous. Most animals will come out of a seizure and recover uneventfully.

If you have a pet ferret that seizes, it is likely that he/she is suffering a hypoglycemic episode caused by an insulinoma or other glucose issue. You can put a small amount of Karo syrup, maple syrup, or other sugar syrup on the gums and tongue. If the pet recovers, monitor and continue until you can get it to an exotics vet the next day.

Pet rabbits and rodents do not tend to seizure for the same reasons as ferrets. If your pet rabbit or rodent is seizing, you should put padding near and under the animal to keep it from injury. If the seizure ends and the pet recovers, you should bring it to an exotics vet the next day. If the seizure either does not end or if the pet recovers badly and cannot stand, eat, or resume normal mentation, you should bring it to the VEG for emergency after hours care.

Bird Emergencies

TOO WEAK TO PERCH: Birds are good at hiding signs of illness when they don't feel well and often when you first notice they are sick, they have been sick a long time. An example of a bird emergency that should not wait is when your bird is unable to perch and/or has not been eating for more than 24 hours. If a bird cannot perch (different from playing on the bottom of the cage) it means they are too weak to balance. These birds should go to the VEG for supportive care until an exotics vet is available.

TRAUMA: Bleeding birds are sometimes an emergency, and sometimes not. A large parrot (cockatoo, macaw) bleeding from a toenail will most likely be fine if you can stop the bleeding. A canary or parakeet with a broken blood feather that will not stop bleeding may be at risk of too much blood loss. Most emergency vets should be capable of stopping bleeding, so if you are concerned, please go to the VEG for emergency care.

Bleeding is best stopped by gentle pressure held for 2-3 minutes. You can also use styptic, cornstarch, or flour on a bleeding toenail.

Other traumatic injuries, such as a hurt leg or wing may, or may not be an emergency. If the bird is willing/able to eat and sleep/rest and is not visibly in shock, it could wait until the next day. If the bird is in clear pain, not eating or drinking, it may benefit from going to the VEG for pain management and supportive care.

RESPIRATORY DISTRESS: Respiratory distress may be considered an immediate emergency. If your bird was fine all day and prior days leading up to the respiratory problem, it may have aspirated food, or be suffering some sort of cardiac event. A bird that is panting, tail bobbing, and in visible respiratory distress should be brought to the VEG after hours.

VOMITING: Vomiting once, or even twice in a bird that has been fine prior to the event does not, in our opinion, constitute an immediate medical emergency. These birds should be kept warm and quiet with plenty of fresh water available and you should contact us in the morning to schedule an appointment. However, if your bird has been vomiting repeatedly for several days without medical attention, they are at risk for dehydration. If they are having trouble standing on the perch or appear dizzy/wobbly, they should be taken to the VEG on emergency after hours.

SEIZURES: If your pet bird has a seizure, you should try to pad the area and prevent it from injuring itself during the seizure. If the bird recovers uneventfully, you should let it rest and get it to an exotics vet the next day. If the bird does not recover normally and is unable to stop seizing, can't eat/stand, etc, than you should take it to the VEG for after hours emergency care.

If your exotic pet is “just not acting right”, such as having decreased appetite, moving around less, different colored or smaller feces, it could probably wait to be seen by an exotics vet during business hours. This may depend on the age of the animal and how long it has been going on, but in general, if one of these animals is eating some and still defecating, it is not considered an imminent emergency.

If your pet, regardless of what kind, ingested/ate something that you believe could be toxic or poisonous, please immediately call the Pet Poison Helpline at 855-764-7661. You can also visit them at www.petpoisonhelpline.com.

And remember.... The best prevention for emergencies is to bring your pet in for yearly exams! This will give us the opportunity to detect underlying illness and discuss signs of illness in more detail.