

CARE OF YOUR PET DURING A SEIZURE

When your pet experiences a seizure, there are several things to keep in mind.

1. Stay away from the mouth – the jaws could cause damage if they involuntarily close on a person during a seizure.
2. If possible, attempt to keep the pet from getting hurt during an episode (keep it away from stairs, sharp objects, etc.).
3. Time the seizure. If it lasts more than five minutes or if the pet has seizures and does not regain consciousness within five minutes, it is a medical emergency and the pet must be taken to the nearest veterinary clinic immediately. (It is essential to use a clock during timing to ensure accuracy).
4. Do not let the pet eat or drink excessive amounts after a seizure. Give the pet access to only a small amount of water or food after it is well recovered from the episode. Depletion of glucose to the brain as a result of a seizure may cause intense hunger. Thick pancake syrup can be given when the pet is able to swallow.
5. Stress to the pet should be avoided because another seizure may be precipitated. The pet should be kept in a quiet area. If the seizure resulted in involuntary urination and/or defecation, the pet should be cleaned (if possible) without stress of a bath.
6. If the pet tends to have seizures in clusters, it should be taken outside often for voiding to reduce the amount of eliminations to clean. Keeping the pet on a leash is vital because it may be confused during this time.
7. Monitor the pet's temperature after an episode. High temperatures (normal is 100°-102° F) may require the pet to be cooled. This may be accomplished by moving the pet to a cooler area; in more severe cases, a cold water bath or veterinary assistance may be necessary. Increased temperature over a long period could be detrimental.
8. Excessive salivation could result in aspiration (i.e., the pet inhales the saliva). If the pet has difficulty breathing or begins coughing, contact your veterinarian.

Your observation of the seizure may assist the veterinarian. Begin a log of when the pet has a seizure, what the pet was doing before the seizure, and what it did after the seizure. Did the seizure start in a specific area of the body (e.g., face twitch)? Did the pet's behavior before the incident indicate that a seizure was going to occur? How long did the seizure last? Did the pet lose consciousness, fall over, or make paddling movements? What were the pet's eye movements (side to side, up and down, straight ahead, or glazed)? If possible, someone in the household should videotape an episode for documentation for the veterinarian.

What is a Seizure?

Any involuntary behavior that occurs abnormally may represent a seizure. Seizures are classified into several categories:

- Grand mal seizures – This is the most common form of seizure in small animals. The entire body is involved in stiffness and possibly stiffness/contraction cycles (tonic/clonic action). The animal loses consciousness and may urinate or defecate. They may paddle with their feet and have chewing gum motions with their jaw.

- Partial seizures – This form of seizure originates from some specific area in the brain and thus involves the activity of a specific region of the body. For example, an eye twitch is in actuality a form of seizure activity. Partial seizures may generalize to involve the whole body.
- Psychomotor seizures – This type of seizure is predominantly behavioral with the animal involuntarily howling, snapping, circling, etc. It may also manifest as simply as your pet staring off into space with a dazed look. This abnormal behavior may be followed by a generalized seizure.

Causes

Seizures may be caused by situations within the brain (such as trauma, infection or cancer), or by situations outside of the brain (such as low blood sugar, metabolic toxins or poisons). The first step to determining why your pet is having seizures is to perform bloodwork. This will rule out those situations outside of the brain. If the bloodwork is normal, the next step is determined by the age of the pet:

ANIMALS LESS THAN ONE YEAR OF AGE: Seizures are usually caused by infection in the brain. Analysis of cerebrospinal fluid would be important for diagnosis.

ANIMALS BETWEEN AGES 1 AND 5: In these animals, usually no cause can be found and the term “epilepsy” is applied. Epilepsy simply means seizure disorder. If seizures are occurring frequently enough, medication is used to suppress them.

ANIMALS MORE THAN 5 YEARS OLD: In this group, seizures are usually caused by a tumor growing inside the brain. A CAT scan or MRI would be the next step to diagnosing the problem. Most such tumors are operable if found early, but special referral is necessary for this procedure.

Treatment

The drug of choice to suppress seizure activity is Phenobarbital. It is an inexpensive drug that is usually dispensed in pill form. Because it can be harmful to the liver, it is necessary to monitor liver values via yearly bloodwork. It takes 1-2 weeks to build up a blood level capable of suppressing seizures. After 2-3 weeks, your veterinarian will want to run a Phenobarbital blood level to determine if it is in the required range. 20-30% of epileptic dogs cannot be controlled with Phenobarbital alone and another drug must be added to their therapy.

Common side effects of Phenobarbital:

- Sedation – animals may become quite stuporous as they get used to this drug. This effect is temporary, lasting until the patient’s metabolism adjusts (usually no longer than a few days).
- Excessive thirst and urination – These side effects are annoying and, unfortunately, permanent if they occur. If these side effects become too objectionable, the Phenobarbital dose will have to be lowered and another medication added for seizure control.

When is it an Emergency?

It is a lucky pet that never has another seizure after beginning medication; but an occasional breakthrough seizure (as disturbing as it may be to watch) is rarely of serious concern. There ARE however, some emergency situations:

- Seizure activity non-stop for 5 minutes or more (this is called “status epilepticus”)
- More than 3 seizures in a 24 hour period

If either of these situations occur, please call your veterinarian immediately.

