

Pet Evacuation & First Aid Basics

A kit and a plan for the members of the household who can't pack their own bag, plus how to safely help an injured pet without getting bitten. Dogs and cats are the default case here, but birds, reptiles, and small mammals each have their own real differences, covered inline below. This is the hands-on side of the Pet Evacuation & Shelter chapter and its addendum. Pack it alongside the rest of the household's kit; see Go-Bags & 72-Hour Kits for what goes in that one.

Never leave a pet behind

An animal left behind in an evacuation has far less ability to escape a fire, flood, or collapse than a person does, especially if it's caged, tied up, or shut inside. If it isn't safe for you to stay, it isn't safe to leave them there either.

The practical exception is fish: they generally can't be evacuated at all. Leave an automatic feeder and clear care instructions for anyone checking on the house instead.

TIP

Calm a storm-panicked dog before trying to load it into a carrier

A dog too frightened to cooperate makes an already-fast evacuation slower. Wrapping it snugly in a towel, like swaddling, applies gentle, steady pressure that has a real calming effect on many dogs, and a towel that already smells like you or home makes it more effective, dogs read a familiar scent as a signal of safety. If the storm or chaos has built up static in the dog's coat, a lightly damp cloth wiped over it first can discharge that static and take the edge off before you even reach for the towel.

Build the kit

Item	Notes
Sturdy carrier, leash, and harness	A carrier is often required at shelters even for calm pets
Food, water, bowls, and a manual can opener	At least a few days' supply; rotate it like you would your own food storage
Medications and copies of medical/vaccination records	Kept in a waterproof container or bag
A basic pet first aid kit	Gauze, vet wrap, tweezers, a muzzle sized for your pet, saline solution
Current photos of you together with each pet	Helps prove ownership and aids reunification if you're separated

Where to find it: pet supply stores and general retailers carry every item individually; a properly sized muzzle specifically is worth buying ahead of time rather than improvising one for the first time during an actual injury.

What's different in the kit for birds, reptiles, and small mammals

Reptiles are cold-blooded and need their own heat source in the kit, a reptile-shipping heat pack, not a human hand warmer, which consumes oxygen and can suffocate a reptile in a closed carrier. Add a thermometer to check the carrier stays warm enough. Most adult reptiles can go about a week without food as long as they have water, so heat and hydration matter more than food here.

Birds need a fully covered, secure carrier to reduce stress and prevent escape, and are extremely sensitive to temperature swings and airborne fumes; see the first aid section below for the specific danger overheated non-stick cookware poses to them.

Rabbits, guinea pigs, and chinchillas need constant access to hay above almost everything else in the kit. These are hindgut-fermenting herbivores where the stress of evacuation alone, not just injury, can trigger gastrointestinal stasis, a life-threatening shutdown of the digestive tract; a pet that stops eating or producing droppings after a stressful move needs a vet, not just time to calm down.

Watch it: FEMA, "Preparing Makes Sense for Pet Owners"; Fire Safe Marin, "Pack a Go Bag for your pets".

Know where you're actually going, before you need to

Many general-population disaster shelters don't accept pets, service animals are the one guaranteed exception. Work this out in advance, not during an evacuation:

- Identify friends, relatives, boarding facilities, or veterinary clinics outside your immediate area who could take your pet in an emergency, and keep their contact information with your kit.
- If you may need a Red Cross shelter, know that staff will try to accommodate pets, but they may end up housed separately through a local animal welfare partner rather than in the same room as you.

Basic first aid for an injured pet

An injured animal is a scared animal, and even the gentlest pet can bite reflexively out of pain and fear. Muzzling before you touch the injury protects both of you, and lets you actually help instead of getting hurt trying.

1. **Assess breathing first.** If the pet is struggling to breathe, panting heavily, or in obvious respiratory distress, **do not muzzle it**; closing the mouth on an animal that can't breathe through its nose alone can be fatal. Get to a vet immediately instead.
2. If breathing looks normal, muzzle before treating anything else. A commercial muzzle is best; a loop of gauze, a leash, or a long stocking laid over the bridge of the nose, crossed underneath, and tied behind the ears works as an improvised version.
3. Control any bleeding with direct pressure using clean gauze, the same principle as the human first aid guide.
4. Keep your face away from the pet's mouth throughout, and avoid hugging or restraining an injured animal tightly against your body.
5. Get to a veterinarian as soon as possible. First aid buys time; it isn't a substitute for actual treatment.

For cats, wrap instead of muzzle

Cat muzzles have poor real-world effectiveness, and scruffing a stressed cat adds more stress than it controls. The safer, more effective technique is a towel wrap ("cat burrito"): lay the cat on the center of a towel and fold the sides snugly around its body to pin all four legs against it, leaving only the head exposed. This controls a frightened, injured cat far better than trying to muzzle one.

Birds and household fumes: a different kind of emergency

Birds are extremely sensitive to airborne toxins, especially fumes from an overheated non-stick (PTFE/Teflon) pan, which are odorless and invisible to people but can kill a bird within minutes. Never use non-stick cookware, aerosols, or scented candles in a room with a bird, evacuation or not. If you suspect exposure, get the bird to fresh air immediately, turn off the source, and get to an avian veterinarian right away; survival is poor once symptoms appear, so speed matters more than with most other pet emergencies.

If a dog or cat is choking

1. Open the mouth and pull the tongue forward, then look inside; if you can see the object, sweep it out with a finger, but don't blindly push at something you can't see, that can lodge it deeper.
2. If that doesn't clear it, for a small dog or cat, lift them with their spine against your chest, clasp your hands together just behind the last rib, and give 5 quick upward thrusts. For a larger dog, stand or kneel behind them, wrap your arms around the body just behind the ribs, and give the same 5 rapid inward-and-upward thrusts.
3. Check the mouth again after every 5 thrusts and remove anything you can see. Alternate thrusts and mouth checks until the object clears or the animal loses consciousness.
4. Get to a vet immediately either way, even if the object clears, don't wait at home to see how they're doing afterward.

If a dog is showing signs of heatstroke

Watch for heavy panting or trouble breathing, collapse, wobbliness, bright red gums, excessive drooling, or vomiting, especially after time in a hot car or direct sun. A dog's normal temperature runs 99.5-102.5°F; a reading above 104°F means heatstroke.

1. Move the dog out of the heat immediately.
2. Wet the belly, armpits, groin, and paw pads with cool, not ice-cold, water. Ice-cold water constricts blood vessels near the skin and actually traps heat in the body's core instead of releasing it.
3. Offer small amounts of cool water to drink if the dog is alert and willing, never pour water directly down the throat, which risks choking or aspiration in an animal that's already distressed.
4. Stop active cooling once the temperature comes down to about 103°F, cooling further than that risks overshooting into hypothermia.
5. Get to a vet regardless of how quickly the dog seems to recover; heatstroke can cause organ damage that isn't visible from the outside, and even a dog that looks fine again needs to be checked.

Write your own plan, in one sentence

An animal left behind wasn't a choice anyone made on purpose, it's what happens when no one decided in advance. Finish this sentence with your own real plan:

"If we have to evacuate, I will grab the carrier by the back door, and our pet's out-of-area contact is Aunt Carol, fenced yard."

Know someone this guide would actually help? Being the person who's ready includes being the person who says something.

[Send them this page ›](#)

Sources

- American Red Cross, pet disaster preparedness and evacuation kit guidance: Red Cross; Ready.gov
- American Veterinary Medical Association, species-specific disaster preparedness (dogs, cats, birds, reptiles, small mammals) and pet first aid guidance: AVMA; AVMA, first aid
- Cat restraint technique (towel wrap vs. muzzle efficacy): dvm360
- PTFE (Teflon) fume toxicity in birds: VCA Animal Hospitals
- Reptile emergency heat sources and evacuation kit guidance: ReptiFiles
- Gastrointestinal stasis in rabbits and guinea pigs, stress as a trigger: Oxbow Animal Health
- Dog and cat choking first aid and abdominal-thrust technique: Red Cross; FirstVet
- Dog heatstroke signs, cooling technique, and target temperature: Red Cross; PetMD
- Towel-wrapping and scent for calming a storm-anxious dog, and static discharge as a contributing factor: GreaterGood; iHeartDogs