

Learning emergency first aid for your pet

Eileen Mitchell

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Leigh Bury demonstrates mouth-to-snout resuscitation on a canine mannequin at a pet first-aid class offered by the American Safety Academy. The three-hour class teaches basic emergency care.

Readers of this column may recall an incident I once shared in which my greyhound, Elvis, nicked his ear tip on a rosebush. The cut was minuscule, but because ear (and tail) tips are so vascular, blood was gushing like a geyser.

By the time I arrived at emergency, the bleeding had stopped, but the on-call doctor cauterized the wound, just to be safe. The five-minute visit was so simple, the receptionist whispered that he probably wouldn't charge me. So did he? You better believe it.

Were that to happen today, I would know exactly how to treat this minor wound myself. After attending a pet first-aid class, I now feel equipped to provide the immediate care required for common illness or injuries that might befall my boy. The three-hour class, taught by the American Safety Academy, is not intended as a

replacement for professional medical treatment but teaches how to provide basic emergency care and perhaps save a pet's life until professional care is available.

According to the American Animal Hospital Association, 1 in 4 injury deaths could have been prevented if first aid had been applied. As anyone who has a pet knows all too well, injuries - from abrasions and bites to burns and bleeding - happen quickly.

Knowledge makes difference

"Unfortunately, pet first-aid training and general emergency preparedness tend to be issues we only think about when it's too late," said American Safety Academy instructor Leigh Bury. "We may feel helpless during an emergency, but when you consider that preventable accidents are the leading cause of death in pre-senior dogs and cats, and that being trained in pet first aid gives us a 1 in 4 chance of saving our pet, we really can make a difference in those first moments of a crisis."

The session I attended featured all dog owners, so our focus was on Fido, although the interactive class is intended for dogs and cats. The manual included in the course fee says that first aid is similar for most pets.

Since our pets can't tell us what is wrong, the illustrated manual provides guidelines for detecting illnesses and injuries as well as instructions for treatment. By following the manual, in tandem with a video and lecture, students are taught how to assess a situation, recognize symptoms and administer care.

"Begin with the three A's," Bury instructed the class. "Assess the scene: Is it safe to approach the animal? Alert your veterinarian or an emergency-care facility: Let them know that you are bringing in a sick or injured pet so they can prepare and meet you outside. Attend to your pet's immediate needs. This means checking their ABCs: airway, breathing and circulation."

Especially helpful was the hands-on practice, using life-size dog mannequins and stuffed animals. We practiced checking for a heartbeat and pulse, learned how to create a restraint if a commercial muzzle isn't available (neckties, pantyhose, belts or Ace bandages) and studied how to administer CPR to a large versus small dog.

We even administered rescue breathing, which is done mouth-to-snout through a protective shield. Should I ever see an anxious Elvis pawing at his face, drooling, breathing loudly and coughing, I will recognize the symptoms of a choking dog and know how to apply a procedure similar to the Heimlich maneuver. Choking is a leading cause of canine cardiac arrest.

"Stick with Nylabones," Bury advised her students. She added that rawhide and pig's ears are notorious choking hazards.

The class covers a large amount of material. The intention isn't to provide a thorough education or foster paranoia but rather to serve as a reminder of the possibilities and the urgency of immediate and proper action. What if your dog is hit by a car? Bitten by a black widow spider? Falls in a pool, is pierced with an arrow or drinks some tasty antifreeze?

Be prepared

The key is to be prepared, which includes having a stocked pet first aid kit. They're similar to human first-aid kits but should also include canned food, veterinarian tape, a penlight, muzzle and leash. Sanitary napkins make excellent substitute gauze pads, and blankets can serve as stretchers. Also include the phone number for the ASPCA National Animal Poison Control Center, which provides phone consultations. (The number is (888) 426-4435; its Web site says a \$60 consultation fee may be applied.) On cell phones, plug in your veterinarian's phone number, plus the number and directions for the closest 24-hour clinic.

"Don't rely on memory," Bury warned. "People tend to panic in an emergency and often can't remember their own names."

When a classmate pointed out that a nearby animal emergency hospital had recently closed, Bury used this as an example of the importance of periodically checking local 24-hour emergency clinics to ensure that the facilities

are still operating. Imagine learning otherwise as you stand in front of the hospital's locked doors at 3 a.m. cradling a sick dog.

Fellow student Shirley Wright said she found the class well worth her time. "I have two cairn terriers and one is a senior dog," the Concord resident said. "I just want to be prepared in case he gets in trouble."

Classes

American Safety Academy pet first aid classes: Today and Oct. 18: Pet Food Express, Campbell; Sunday and Oct. 19: Pet Food Express, Market Street, San Francisco; Oct. 7: Emerald Glen Activity Center, Dublin; Oct. 11: Pet Food Express, Danville; Nov. 1: Las Positas Community Education, Livermore. For details, call (925) 803-1600. Be sure to ask about discount coupons.

E-mail freelance writer Eileen Mitchell at home@sfchronicle.com. Send your pet concern questions to home@sfchronicle.com with "Ask the Vet" in the guideline, and each month a guest veterinarian will address a different subject. "Ask the Vet" is for informational purposes only. Readers should not act on information seen in this column without seeking professional veterinary advice. E-mail freelance writer Eileen Mitchell at home@sfchronicle.com.

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