

Abscess: First Aid

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Animal teeth and claws easily puncture skin, introducing bacteria under the skin. If the skin heals quickly, the bacteria become trapped and create pockets of infection commonly referred to as abscesses.

Abscesses may be very small or extraordinarily large, and may feel swollen and warm. These are often extremely painful. Typically, animals with abscesses become depressed



Cat - Large Abscess on Back. Photo courtesy of The VIN emergency medicine folder staff

and may tend to hide in inconspicuous places. Occasionally abscesses may rupture prior to the onset of any other signs. Abscesses of the anal glands are common and can be mistaken for rectal bleeding if they rupture. They may cause the pet to "scoot" the rectal area on the ground. Tooth root abscesses typically form just below the eye, and start as a bump or swelling. They may break open and bleed, and the pet may stop eating due to the pain or experience pain upon chewing.

Small, uncomplicated abscesses may respond to medical therapy, while larger and more extensive abscesses may require surgical treatment. Proper surgical management of abscesses often requires placing a drain or latex tubing (either under sedation or general anesthesia) to provide an escape route for secretions from the wound's damaged tissues.

Tooth root abscesses require tooth extraction – antibiotics alone will only lead to a temporary solution, but the abscess will recur unless the affected tooth is pulled. This surgery requires general anesthesia.

What to Do

Abscesses should be examined by a veterinarian as soon as possible and within 24 hours.

- Fluid may normally drain from the site of an abscess. An abscess does not drain through the tube, but rather around the latex tubing. Therefore, it is important for you to clean the area around the drain if directed to do so by your veterinarian.
- Apply a warm compress to the affected site at least two times daily for 3 to 5 days after your pet leaves the hospital. Wet a clean washcloth with warm water and place it directly over the affected site, and then apply gentle pressure ideally for 5 to 10 minutes. Test it on your skin - **if it is too hot for you, it is too hot for your pet.**
- Be sure you and/or other family members wash your hands thoroughly after contacting any fluids draining from the

abscess site.

- Be sure to give all prescribed medications exactly and completely as detailed by your pet's veterinarian. Some patients may appear to feel better after only a few days of treatment; however, it is crucial for medications to be administered according to schedule to prevent the infection from recurring.
- Restrict your pet to indoor activities until the infection has resolved completely.
- Notify your pet's doctor should your pet experience any of the following:
 - Increased redness and/or heat from the site of the abscess
 - Failure of the abscess to heal
 - Worsening of your pet's general health
 - Loss of appetite lasting longer than 24 hours

What NOT to Do

- Do not attempt to open the abscess yourself.
- Do not attempt compressing the wounds of an animal that may bite you. Your safety is of utmost importance to us. Contact your veterinarian for assistance should this situation arise.
- Do not apply topical medicines (such as ointments or creams), give any human medications (such as Tylenol/acetaminophen or Advil/ibuprofen), or use any home remedies, unless directed by a veterinarian.

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