

Factsheet

Hands-On: Assessing Animals' Needs

Memorizing this information may be the most important thing you do. Once you venture out, you'll likely meet dozens, perhaps hundreds, of dogs and cats who need your help. How will you know what they need? How will you prioritize cases? What constitutes an emergency? For answers to these vital questions, read on and memorize!

The ABCs of Animal Care: The Basics Required by Law

In most places, the anti-cruelty statute (look yours up here:

www.municode.com/Resources/OnlineLibrary.asp for local codes and www.animallaw.info/topics/spusstatecrueltylaws.htm for state laws) requires that

animals be provided with shelter sufficient to keep them reasonably warm, dry, and shaded; access to appropriate food and clean water at reasonable intervals; and veterinary care or euthanasia to abate suffering. Of course, laws are only useful if they are enforced by the appropriate agency, which (depending on the area) may be animal control, the police, or the sheriff's office.

Always know, before heading out into the field, what the law is in each of the jurisdictions that you visit and who is charged with enforcing it. Keep a copy of the law in your car, as well as telephone numbers for animal control and the after-hours police/sheriff dispatch. These are your ABCs.

Tip: Keep up with your local laws. More and more jurisdictions are recognizing the link between continuous chaining and canine aggression and passing chaining bans or restrictions. If your target areas don't yet have such a law on the books, consider working to pass one! For more information, visit: http://helpinganimals.com/ga_chained.asp.

Your goal is to improve the quality of life for animals in

your target areas on a long-term basis. Although you should always be able to rely on law enforcement agencies, you will not want to call on them every time you encounter a questionable situation. Too frequently calling an overburdened animal control agency can result in lowered responsiveness and automatic irritation when you call, and—more importantly—it can get you kicked out of the picture by an animal's legal custodian, thereby preventing you from helping *any* animals.

However, if you suspect animal abuse or chronic neglect, and you have not been able to make headway yourself, alerting law enforcement is vital and can make the difference between life and death to a suffering animal. Please see our factsheet "What to Do if You Spot Animal Abuse" for information on documenting and pursuing potential cruelty cases.

Your Sense of Urgency Is an Animal's Best Friend

Be alert, attentive, and aware of everything you see and feel when examining an animal. You will surely run into urgent situations that will require you to think on your feet and act fast. Be ready to explain to an animal's custodian that a prolapsed rectum or a broken leg requires immediate action. Emergencies include but are not limited to prolapsed vagina or rectum, suspected parvovirus, severe weakness and/or emaciation preventing the animal from behaving normally, broken limbs including compound fractures (bones protruding), open wounds that appear to need stitching, infections

including pyometra (uterine infection), bloody discharge from the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, or rectum, and other painful or life-threatening conditions.

It is the responsibility of an animal's legal guardian to provide that animal with a healthy, humane living environment, including necessary veterinary care. Keep in mind that in some situations, ailing or injured animals will be signed over to you when custodians realize that they cannot afford treatment or even an exam. It is up to you to do what is best for each and every animal. Always weigh your options carefully and remember that the animal's quality of life is your number one priority.

Head to Tail: What to Look, Feel, and Smell For

- **Eyes:** If there is a discharge or if the third eyelid is visible, that may indicate an eye infection or inflammation (conjunctivitis), upper respiratory infection, or another disease that can compromise the immune system.
- **Nose:** Dogs' noses should be slightly wet and cold to the touch. A green or yellow discharge may be an indication of a serious upper respiratory infection, labored breathing, allergies, or even heartworm disease (heartworms basically strangle the heart and limit the amount of oxygen circulating in the animal's blood).
- **Mouth:** Foul breath may be an indication of a mouth or tooth infection or mouth ulcers. Check the gums to ensure that they are a healthy pink color. White gums may be an indication of anemia (iron deficiency), which is often brought on by internal as well as external parasites, e.g., tapeworms, hookworms, or whipworms, fleas, or ticks. Pale gums can also be an indication of internal bleeding. Animals with pale gums may be in need of prompt medical care, especially if they are listless.

- **Ears:** Should be clean and free of odor or discharge, either of which may be an indication of ear mites or an ear infection. Untreated ear mite infestations cause intense itching, often leading animals to scratch the skin around their ears bloody.



- **Neck:** You should be able to fit at least two fingers under an animal's collar. Always check to make sure that dogs are not wearing choke or prong collars (especially when chained!), which cause pain and wounds. Cats should wear only breakaway collars. Be especially diligent about checking puppy and kitten collars; it is common for young animals to grow too big for collars that are forgotten and never loosened, causing terrible pain and infection so severe that the collars can only be removed surgically. Be alert for the smell of rot or infection—collars can become so deeply embedded in the neck that the skin will grow around them.
- **Feet:** For animals who are limping or hesitant to put weight on front or back limbs, gently check between toes for a lodged rock, burr, splinter, or tick. For animals kept in confined spaces, check pads for redness and irritation from urine burns (from being forced to stand, sit, and lie amid their own waste).
- **Belly:** A bloated abdomen is a bad sign and may be an indication of untreated internal parasites. Parasites such as tapeworms, hookworms, and whipworms lodge in animals' intestines and feed off their blood, which makes it difficult for animals to absorb nutrients. Heartworm and liver diseases in their more

advanced stages can also cause bloating because of fluid retention.



- **Skeletal Structure:** Animals should have some good muscle tone and some fat. You should never be able to count ribs or see protruding hip bones or spine. For information on assessing canine weight, please see <http://www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/pubs/tac.c.pdf>. Please be sure to put your hands on thick-coated dogs like chow-chow and husky mixes, as their fluffiness may hide protruding ribs and hip bones—gently run your hands up and down the animal's body.
- **Stool:** Loose stool or diarrhea can be a sign of parasites or a viral or bacterial infection. With dogs, bloody diarrhea is a red flag for parvovirus, a deadly, highly contagious (especially to puppies) disease that attacks the stomach lining and causes vomiting, dehydration, and often a slow death. Parvovirus is easily preventable with an affordable vaccine, but treatment for parvo is often unsuccessful and extremely expensive—up to \$1,000 per day! Suspected parvovirus constitutes an emergency.
- **Skin and Coat:** The skin should be healthy-looking and free of fleas and ticks, and the fur should be uniform in growth (without patches of redness or

hair loss) and free of matting and loose hair. Look for excessive itching, which may be a sign of mange. Animals suffering from mange will scratch themselves bloody and hairless and may even develop a secondary infection from breaking the skin. There are two types of mange (a veterinary professional must perform a skin scrape and look at the skin sample under a microscope to positively diagnose which form): demodectic mange, also known as demodex, and sarcoptic mange, also known as scabies. Demodex is an immune-insufficiency condition and is not contagious, but sarcoptic mange can be transmitted to other animals as well as to humans.

- **Overall Disposition:** Animals should have a healthy appetite when offered food (however, fearful animals and animals who are nervous around new people may not eat in your presence). Look for signs of lethargy or depression, which are usually indicative of a physical problem. Animals who appear listless and have no appetite, have to make an effort to stand up or lift their head, and generally seem uninterested are likely suffering and need prompt medical attention.
- **Living Conditions:** All animals should have easy access to a clean water receptacle containing drinkable (“potable”) water and a living area free of debris (broken glass, junk, etc.) and their own waste. Tethered dogs should be tethered by a lightweight tie-out with swivels at both ends to prevent tangling and must be able to easily access their food, water, and shelter at all times.

