

# Effective veterinary response to animal abuse

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*Animal abuse is an important social issue affecting animals, families and communities. Both to protect an animal victim and because the abuse may be a sentinel for other violence that is occurring within or outside the family, it is crucial that veterinarians deal effectively with instances of suspected animal maltreatment.*

## BEFOREHAND

1. Know the laws on animal protection, both national and local.
2. Find out your veterinary association's regulations concerning confidentiality and the reporting of abuse. Is reporting of abuse mandatory? Is immunity provided for good faith reporting?
3. Know to whom abuse should be reported – generally the local humane authority (SPCA, animal control, humane society).
4. Discuss the issue in your practice. Educate staff about warning signs of animal abuse.
5. Establish a written clinic policy regarding reporting of abuse. Include important phone numbers – animal protection, police, social services for concerns about child abuse.
6. Develop a follow-up strategy for cases that are not reported (e.g. neglect cases that may be remedied by client education, or cases of illness or injury that are vaguely suspicious). Designate a staff member to determine if veterinary recommendations are followed – for rechecks, improved husbandry, etc.
7. Discuss in your practice signs that may indicate abuse or neglect in children or adults.
8. Find out if the women's shelter in your community asks abused women about pets in the home, and what arrangements the shelter is able to make for those animals if they are in danger. Consider providing temporary housing for such animals.

## Addressing suspected abuse

Some cases, particularly of neglect, may be handled through client education. Cases of evident abuse or ongoing neglect should be reported to the appropriate authority. Studies in the child protection field have shown that intervention is critical to breaking the cycle of violence for animals or people subject to abuse.

## If you suspect abuse:

1. Gather as much information as possible in a non-confrontational manner. Ask how did this happen. When? Who was involved?
2. Perform a thorough physical exam. Meticulously record your findings. Begin collecting evidence, including photographs, as soon as you suspect abuse.
3. Remember that you may not hold or treat an animal without owner permission, or until an investigation is underway and you are authorized by the investigating agency. But if you have owner permission to take an x-ray, for e.g., you can expand to take whole body radiographs to help you rule out abuse.
4. In deciding **whether to educate or report**, consider:
  - the number of problems, their duration and severity
  - the history – does it make sense in light of the injuries?
  - previous medical records for this patient, or for any other animals of this client
  - the client's attitude – concerned, or indifferent
  - attitudes of, or comments by, other family members

## RECOGNIZING ABUSE

Animal abuse includes physical (non-accidental injury), sexual or emotional abuse, neglect, and staged animal fights. The majority of abuse arises from neglect. **Suspicions are generally raised by a combination of factors.** No single feature is diagnostic of abuse.

### Some warning signs of abuse and neglect

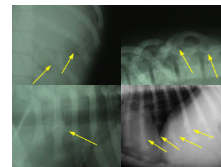
#### 1. History

- vague or doesn't fit with the injuries
- client appears unconcerned
- children/other adult may give conflicting information about how the injuries occurred, or the story may change over time (discrepant history)
- history of previous pets with suspicious injuries, or that died or disappeared at a young age (< 2 years)

#### 2. Suspicious injuries

- unexplained traumatic injury/ies
- multiple fractures, especially in different stages of healing
- bruising (may only be detected by shaving or, on necropsy, under the skin)
- repeated injuries – old healed or untreated wounds, may be in various stages of healing (typical in breeds used for dog fighting)
- eye injuries, especially subconjunctival or scleral haemorrhage
- stupor or bizarre behaviour due to ingestion of drugs or poison
- internal injuries
- vaginal or anorectal injuries (sexual abuse)
- burns, scalds

**Multiple fractures in different stages of healing are a cardinal sign of abuse.** These x-rays are from a 3-month old female pit bull. The 2 top and left bottom photos show old healed fractures (evident callus) while the bottom right photo shows recent fractures. used with permission, R. Reisman, ASPCA



#### 3. Neglect

- extreme malnourishment
- embedded collar
- severe matting, overgrown nails or hooves
- heavy ectoparasite infestations
- untreated illness or dental disease
- overall filth; maggots

These latter signs may also be seen in cases of **animal hoarding**. Hoarders, or collectors, typically accumulate many more animals than they can provide adequate care for, and fail to recognize the deteriorating environmental conditions and the impact on the health of the animals and other household members. These owners typically bring in a constantly changing parade of pets, whom they may perfume or bath to conceal odour, and they are always willing to take in more animals.

See also: [www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/](http://www.tufts.edu/vet/cfa/hoarding/)

## REPORTING AND DOCUMENTING ABUSE

The goal is to initiate an investigation to determine the facts of the situation. Reporting *in good faith* means that a reasonable suspicion of abuse exists according to your professional judgment, based on the historical findings and physical examination of the patient. A report that does not lead to charges may still have a positive impact on the situation.

### Reporting abuse

1. Contact the appropriate humane authority in your jurisdiction to report your concerns.
2. If the animal and/or people involved are at immediate risk, call the police.
3. If there are children involved, report your concerns to Social Services.

### Collecting and documenting evidence

1. Work with the investigating agency to develop and document the case.
2. Preserve and document the evidence.
  - perform a detailed physical exam, or necropsy
  - record detailed history, including any additional information that may have been told to other staff
  - perform CBC, chemistry panel, U/A, etc.
  - take whole body radiographs to look for fractures in various stages of healing
3. Maintain the chain of custody of the evidence. Notify anyone else involved (e.g. laboratory) that this is a forensic investigation.
4. Take lots of good quality photographs and/or video and label appropriately. (Videos are good for musculoskeletal injuries or neurological deficits.)
5. Maintain thorough, legible medical records as legal documents throughout the treatment period.
6. Store all records securely (medical records, lab reports, x-rays, etc). It can take 1-2 years before a case comes to trial. See also [www.veterinaryforensics.com](http://www.veterinaryforensics.com)

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Go to the CVMA website under Animal Welfare for comprehensive information on responding to animal abuse <http://canadianveterinarians.net/animal-abuse.aspx>
- The Link – animal abuse, child abuse and domestic violence
  - Recognizing abuse
  - Reporting abuse
  - Collecting and documenting evidence
  - Veterinarians as expert witnesses
  - Building a safe and humane community