

Natural First Aid for Dogs

Natural first-aid kits carry helpful equipment beyond bandages and gauze.

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When I think of first aid, I have in mind the initial care that anyone with a little training can offer an animal in immediate distress. In this light, first aid can be given to an animal at the first signs of injury or disease ... and if the condition is beyond the scope of the aid person, the animal can then be transported to the vet for more extensive care.

When viewed this way, natural remedies offer the perfect mechanism for helping many injuries or ailments when they first become evident. However, even though some natural remedies have very potent healing activities, it's been my experience that, for the most part, they are better used for more chronic diseases.

In fact, it's hard to beat Western medicine for treating severe and acute injuries or diseases. I have an herbalist friend who says: "If your dog has just been hit by a car, you probably don't want to call for an herbalist first."

There is one bottom-line, before-you-begin essential whenever you're using first aid for man or beast: Know what you are doing.

There are numerous commercially available first-aid kits – of the "natural" variety or otherwise, so having a kit on hand is no problem. However, unless you know how to use the kit's ingredients, they won't do you much good. What good are the best wound-wrapping materials if you don't know how to wrap a leg or tail?

It is even more important when you are using natural remedies to know what you are doing. Natural remedies typically operate in ways that don't necessarily conform to how Western medicine is applied. When you're trying to save a dog in a crisis, there's no time to read directions.

If you feel a mite rusty when it comes to basic first-aid techniques, consider taking a course. There are several pet-related courses available – from one sponsored by some of the chapters of the American Red Cross, to online courses, to those offered by local shelters and veterinarians. With a little research, you'll be able to find one that suits your needs.

A standard first-aid kit for dogs should contain the following: a rectal thermometer, tape and bandage material (my favorites are elastic tape and one of the cling-on types of gauze), cotton gauze pads and cotton swabs, sturdy scissors, tweezers or hemostats, hydrogen peroxide (the best wound cleaner available); and some type of topical antibiotic (I prefer herbal antibiotics such as lavender oil or calendula). An additional essential component of the household "first-aid kit" is that folks need to stay calm.

I think first-aid kits are a wonderful addition to any household, but I rely almost as much on what's available around the house and in the yard and garden. We walk our property almost daily, so I know where most of the medicinal weeds grow and what garden herbs are ready for the harvest. We also have bunches of drying herbs, hanging from various places throughout the house.

Following are some natural remedies I like to keep around the house in case I need to treat my Pokey Dog. And even though I'm a veterinarian with experience in emergency care, I would not hesitate to take Pokey to the local emergency service if I thought he needed more than I could offer at home.

Natural necessities

Aconite. This is a homeopathic remedy that I find applies well to almost any disease or condition that we can catch early on, before it has a chance to get too deep-seated. For example: When dogs in a kennel or household start to cough, I'd begin with a high-potency dose of aconite for all the dogs, and I'd repeat the dosage every few hours for several treatments. Then, I'd monitor the progress of the cough and treat with additional homeopathic or herbal remedies as the symptoms develop and define.

Aloe vera plant. A first-aid kit in a pot. Simply pull off a leaf and squeeze the juice onto any cut, scrape or burn. Its effects are soothing as well as healing. I think every house should have several aloe plants, adding greenery to the window sills as well as providing ready-made first-aid care.

Arnica. Another homeopathic remedy that should be included in any first-aid kit. It effectively combats pain resulting from sprains and bruises. Treatment for acute pain consists of several high-potency doses spaced a few hours apart.

Calendula flowers. Perhaps the best of the skin healers, it is easy to grow in the garden, making fresh flowers readily available in summertime. Calendula has antibiotic properties, and it promotes rapid healing of skin tissues. I also keep a jar of dried flowers around so I can brew up a tea whenever necessary, summer or winter. Calendula tea, spritzed over the affected area, is my treatment of choice for any skin wound and is especially helpful for combating those early itchy areas that may become hot spots.

Lavender essential oil. Lavender is one of nature's best wound cleansers, and it also promotes healing. The lavender oil can be applied directly to any wound, and its aroma tends to be quieting and calming.

CPR in a needle. The acupuncture point GV-26 is indicated for emergencies such as shock, collapse or heatstroke, and it will help revive the animal coming out of anesthesia or the just-born puppy that isn't breathing properly. GV-26 is located on the median plane of the upper lip, at the junction of its dorsal and middle third. The point can be activated by sticking it with an acupuncture needle, a pin, a syringe needle, a fingernail – anything with some sharpness to it.

Rescue Remedy. Rescue Remedy is a combined flower essence that is used in any emergency situation – the dog just hit by a car or a dog nearing collapse from heat exhaustion, as examples.

Slippery Elm bark coats the gastrointestinal tract and soothes as it helps restore the tract to normal. Because it tends to normalize intestinal activity, it is good for treating either diarrhea or constipation. I think it works especially well for the animal that can get overexcited during trips or when competing. Give about a teaspoon of the powder a few hours before departing (or competing) and repeat if necessary. (Note that the powder tends to precipitate out when mixed in water, so either stir fast and dose it right away, or give it in capsular form.)

Other natural remedies

Chamomile flowers. Chamomile has antibiotic activity, but its big advantage is that it seems to be calming while it attacks microorganisms. It is thus indicated for any painful injury or infection, and an upset stomach can often be calmed by adding some chamomile tea to a dog's dinner. Ear infections and painful skin lesions often respond well to topically applied chamomile, perhaps mixed with mullein.

Mullein flowers seem to be one of the best remedies to "calm" ear infections. Because mullein is a common weed in most parts of the country, you can make up your own ear-cure mixture at home. Simply cut off the flowering "cobs" and let them soak in olive oil for several days; strain off the flowers; and use the oily part. This mullein in oil is a nice mixture to use when a painful ear infection is driving your dog crazy, or when its ear canal has just been invaded by a foxtail or plant awn. A few drops ease the pain and soften the sharp barbs of the foxtail – until you can get him to the vet for a more thorough exam.

Natural eye wash. Dogs seem to have an innate ability to attract stuff to their eyes – dust, seeds, burs, cat's claws – and anything in the eye can be extremely irritating. Oftentimes simply washing the eye out is all that's necessary. My favorite eye wash is eyebright, an herbal product readily available in drugstores and supermarkets, or one that you can mix up at home. Simply save some dried eyebright in a jar, brew into a mild tea, and irrigate the affected eye(s) with the tea as needed.

Plantain is perhaps the best remedy for stings and bites. To apply the healing and soothing activities of plantain, chew a leaf into a poultice (or, if you are too fastidious to do that, mix it into a watery or oily gruel) and apply it to the area of the sting or bite.

Yarrow flowers are also known as "Warrior's Wound Wort," a tribute to their ability to stop mild to moderate bleeding. If you have an arterial geyser, you'll likely need something more than yarrow. Yarrow also has the ability to aid healing. It is easy to grow, and we always have a few sprigs of the flowers and upper leafy parts drying in the house. Interestingly, yarrow tends to grow in the wild over rocky areas – exactly the places where you'd expect injuries to occur. So, all you need to do is pick some yarrow leaves and flowers, chew them into a poultice, and apply to the affected area. Yarrow tea is also a good herb to help combat fevers.

Other homeopathic remedies to consider include: Chamomilla; Nux v.; Apis; Belladonna; Bryonia; Rhus tox; Hypericum; and any others that might apply to your dog's specific conditions. For example, if your dog suffers from chronic arthritis, Rhus tox or Bryonia (depending on the dog's typical symptoms) might help him get over those days of severe pain.



A first-aid kit for your beloved dogs is a must. It's just as vital to know how to apply basic first-aid techniques and how to use the remedies you have on hand. The final step to any complete first-aid kit is to have ready access to the phone number and address of your local vet and the local emergency clinic.

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