

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

Tips from BEBHS Medical Director, Dr. Amos Deinard

Given the recent tragic events in the Gulf coast due to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, it is timely and worthwhile for us here in Northern California to consider how we would deal with a disaster event if it were to occur. And since we do live in California, we should all recall that EVERY DAY IS EARTHQUAKE DAY. Hence, it becomes that much more important to ask the question: “Are you prepared in case of a disaster?” If you have companion animals, the answer to this question becomes that much more complex because every disaster plan should include your pets. ***Remember that your pet’s best protection is to be with you.*** But, taking a pet with you requires special planning. Not only do pets have different needs than people, but due to space restrictions and health concerns most animals, except service dogs, may not be allowed into any post-disaster shelters.

ADVANCE PLANNING

Have a home evacuation plan in place before a disaster strikes, because it is the best way to protect you, your family and your pets from a disaster. In fact, knowing what potential hazards may exist ahead of time may help you reduce the seriousness of potential injury and loss of life.

Have these basic Earthquake/disaster supplies in your house:

- Flashlight and portable radio with extra batteries
- Emergency food and potable water—at least a three day supply for you and your pets
- Water purifier or purification tablets
- First Aid Kit (including Hydrogen Peroxide, Betadine Solution and Neosporin or Bacitracin Ointment)
- Manual can opener
- Any essential medicines, for both you and your pet—remember to keep the supply fresh by rotating the medications each time you get a new prescription.
- Some cash (~\$100) and credit cards
- Extra clothing that includes sturdy shoes and/or work boots, hats, heavy-duty gloves, rain gear, dust mask, thermal underwear, blankets and/or a sleeping bag.
- Leashes and/or carriers to help transport pets
- Bowls, litter and pan, plastic bags
- Any important family documents, including recent veterinary records that include vaccination histories as well as information on feeding schedules, medical conditions, behavior problems, and the name and number of your veterinarian in case you board your animals

Remember to store your earthquake/disaster supplies in a convenient place known to all family members; change/rotate your food/water supply every 6 months; replace batteries; have any necessary medicines handy and include a short-term extra supply.

Make contact arrangements

Have an out of state friend or relative serve as a family contact, as it may be easier to place a long distance call than local call.

Be prepared for your pet's stress

In trying to manage and care for your companion animals, keep in mind that the behavior of animals, even your beloved companion for the past 15 years, may change dramatically after an earthquake/disaster. It is quite normal for routinely quiet and friendly animals to become fractious and potentially dangerous. Remember, your pet will not only be dealing with their own anxiety and confusion, but they will undoubtedly be also picking up and responding to your own anxiety, stress and behavior.

Locate a safe place for your pets BEFORE a disaster strikes

Remember that evacuation shelters may not take animals, except service animals, and temporary animal shelters may fill quickly. Consequently, the best plan is to have a pre-determined location, either a close friend or a family member, to not only serve as a distant meeting point, but also to provide a living space for you, your family and your animals if needed.

If your plan includes evacuating to a distant hotel or motel, know beforehand whether or not they will accept animals and what requirements they have. While some requirements may be modified under a disaster scenario, it is best to know before you go.

Clearly identify your pets

Make sure all animals have current identification, licenses and are current and up to date on their core vaccinations. Consider microchipping your companion animals.

Microchips serve as a permanent identification for your pet and their registration is often cross-listed with your (the owner's) information and the veterinarian who implanted the chip. **Remember:** since earthquakes/disasters often occur suddenly, keep ID tags on your pets at all times.

Prepare for not being home when disaster strikes

Consider making an arrangement with a neighbor who would be willing to evacuate your pets/animals in case you cannot make it home. Make sure that your standby or alternate caregiver person knows your animals, can locate your emergency supplies and has a key to your home. Provide the person with instructions and telephone contact numbers to reach you.

AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

Immediately

- Check your pet for injuries—know your pets hiding places, especially if you have cats or pocket pets, as they may “hide” in a frightening situation.
- Keep your pet confined in your yard or home, as aftershocks may occur, but check fencing for damage before putting your pet back into your yard.
- If you know that a disaster is imminent (e.g. aftershocks), bring your pets inside immediately and get them under control using either a leash, crate or a carrier.

If you must leave

Again, it is highly recommended that you take your pet with you if you need to evacuate. However, if you must evacuate and cannot take your pets it is recommended that you place them in a safe, secure room (a bathroom is often ideal). Do not tie an animal down—either inside or outside. Leave enough food and water for an extended period of time 3-7 days. Leave familiar toys and bedding. Make sure that they have current identification. Do not confine dogs and cats together. Place a notice on your door or elsewhere in your home that has contact information for you and an alternative person, as well as your veterinarian.

Planning ahead will give your pets a much better chance for survival when a disaster occurs. And, you will be more likely to have your pets with you, or be able to quickly locate them if they must stay behind.

If you want to microchip your pet, or ensure their good health, call the BEBHS veterinary hospital at 510-845-3633 for an appointment with Dr. Amos. We offer comprehensive services that can meet the needs of most pets.

Sources for this article include: American Veterinary Medical Foundation, American Red Cross and 72hours.org—San Francisco's Office of Emergency Services web site.