



Nursing Care after Spinal Cord Injury

Your pet is recovering from a serious spinal cord injury. It is important to provide good nursing care during the recovery period. Please remember that despite the pain medications prescribed, your pet might have pain and be guarded during certain activities and may act unexpectedly. If you have any concerns, please contact our office for advice on safe handling.

The following instructions for home care will aid in your pet's recovery:

1. Confine your pet to a cage, play/exercise pen, or small room for the next 4 - 6 weeks. This area should be kept clean, well padded (e.g. clean blankets/towels over a foam rubber pad, waterbed, or air mattress), and have secure footing.
2. Keep your pet's skin dry and free of urine and feces. If bathing is required, do not submerge any skin incisions under water until after suture removal. Baby wipes can be used to gently clean areas around an incision.
3. Take care not to bend the back or neck when handling your pet. The following is recommended for lifting/carrying your pet:
 - Small dogs: put one hand between the back legs and one hand on the chest between the front legs
 - Medium/large dogs: put one hand just in front of the back legs and one hand just on front of the front legs
4. Use a sling to take your pet outside to urinate/defecate if your pet is unable to walk.
 - When your pet is in standing position, place a sling (or folded towel, sheet, or plastic garbage bag) in front of the hind legs under the abdomen. The toes of the back feet should just barely touch the ground.
 - Sling walk your pet for 10 - 15 minutes, 2 - 3 times daily to assist with urination and encourage muscle function.
5. Make sure that your pet urinates at least 1-2 times a day. The ability to urinate voluntarily can be lost along with loss of limb function. Permanent bladder damage and bladder infections can occur when large amounts of urine are allowed to accumulate in the bladder.
 - If your pet is unable to urinate voluntarily, you will need to manually express the bladder. Apply gentle pressure with both hands on the abdomen while your pet is in a standing position. This will be demonstrated for you before you leave the hospital. The bladder should be expressed 3 to 4 times daily. If your pet is dripping urine frequently or continuously, the bladder is overfull and needs to be expressed.
 - If your pet is urinating voluntarily, it is not necessary to express the bladder. A good indicator of voluntary urination is a large amount of urine produced in a single period.

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Nursing Care after Spinal Cord Injury cont.

6. Perform range of motion exercises for the affected limbs if your pet is unable to walk. This entails slow, full flexion and extension of each joint 25 times, 3 times a day.
 - Once your pet is strong enough to support some weight, you can increase muscle strength by encouraging standing for a few minutes while helping to maintain balance as needed.
 - Your doctor may recommend swimming for 20 to 30 minutes daily. A bathtub full of lukewarm water (deep enough so your pet's toes cannot touch bottom) is adequate for small pets. A swimming pool or lake may be used for larger pets. It is very important to always directly monitor your pet while swimming. Do not begin this activity unless directed by your doctor.
7. Pets that are unable to walk generally take between 2 weeks and 2 months before regaining the ability to walk without assistance. Some pets may take several months to recover due to the severity and location of the spinal injury. Carts are not recommended unless recovery is very prolonged (more than 6 months) or the injury is so severe that return of significant leg function is not expected.
8. If you have any concerns or notice any of the following problems, please call OVRA:
 - Blood in the urine or feces
 - Depression, vomiting, loss of appetite
 - Difficulty breathing



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