

For companion animal owners

Emergency and after hours care



This information is provided by the Veterinary Council of New Zealand to give animal owners guidance about their responsibilities and rights.

Your obligations as an animal owner

If you own an animal, your duty under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 is to meet their physical, behavioural, and health needs. This includes quickly taking action when your animal is unwell.

We recommend that you enrol your animals with a local veterinary clinic. As well as providing health care, the practice will ensure that you can access 24 hour emergency care for them.

What is an emergency?

A veterinary emergency is a sudden, unforeseen injury, illness or complication in an animal that requires immediate veterinary treatment to save its life or provide relief from significant pain or distress.

An emergency might be if your pet is having trouble breathing; has been involved in an accident; is bleeding or wounded; or has eaten something dangerous.

Planning for an emergency

When an animal is in your care, you should make a plan for what to do during an emergency so you know who to contact or where to go, and how you will pay for any urgent or unexpected care.

Once you enrol your pet with a veterinary clinic, ask how they provide emergency care, after hours. They may offer it at their clinic or have an arrangement with another practice if they don't provide it themselves.

Veterinarians are not publicly funded, so you need to pay the full cost of the veterinary care your animal needs. If you can't pay for emergency care at the time of your consultation, your veterinarian will still provide the necessary care to manage pain and suffering, and first aid. In extreme cases, this may mean putting your animal to sleep.

What if my veterinarian says they can't help?

Veterinarians are only required to attend emergencies after hours. If they decide that something is not an emergency, they may ask you to wait until normal business hours.

There could be times when an on-duty veterinarian can't attend an emergency within a reasonable time, and they or someone they ask, will help you to access an alternative veterinary service. This may also happen if the veterinarian does not have the knowledge or skills to help the species of animal you have or its problem.

How long do I have to wait for an emergency service?

Wait times can change depending on the circumstances. Busy clinics may have to prioritise care based on urgency, like the emergency department of a hospital. This may mean you have to wait if there are other, more urgent cases.

In rural areas, there may be fewer clinics or veterinarians, which can also lead to longer wait times. In others, your normal clinic may close after hours and refer you to a dedicated emergency after hours veterinary clinic if there is one in your town or region.

It can be difficult to wait when you're worried about your animal, but you can trust that your veterinarian is trained to make these decisions. If the condition of your animal gets worse while you are waiting, let a staff member know.

Being prepared can save a lot of stress for you and your pet. Other things you can do to plan ahead for unexpected emergencies include:

- Making sure your pet is registered and microchipped.
- Checking your contact details are up-to-date on your veterinarian's database.
- Knowing if your veterinary clinic provides after hours care locally or refers to a dedicated emergency care clinic.
- Ensuring your pet's routine vaccinations are done when needed.
- Investigating pet insurance, or having a separate account for savings for an emergency, to help cover the cost of unexpected veterinary bills.
- Organising transport to an emergency clinic if you don't drive, e.g. asking a neighbour or family member in advance if they are willing to help you in an emergency.

