

Recognizing Respiratory Distress in Pets

Emergency

Consider sustained breathing trouble in pets an emergency. Don't call. Take your pet straight to the nearest ER. Respiratory issues receive priority evaluation in the triage system used in most veterinary emergency hospitals. Because pets typically compensate for or hide their struggles, veterinarians often see bigger breathing issues much later than would ever happen with people.

Panting

While dogs pant or breathe with their mouths open for many reasons, that's not normal for cats. A panting cat is struggling to breathe and should be considered a medical emergency.

Heat Stroke

Dogs also can get heat stroke due to respiratory distress, so watch for a high temperature too (103° or higher). A normal temperature for dogs is 101.0 to 102.5° Fahrenheit or 38.3

to 39.2° Celsius. Be extra cautious about overheating in breeds with smooshed faces.

Rapid Breathing

Both dogs and cats can develop rapid breathing during respiratory distress. The normal number of breaths at rest is 15-30 per minute. Anything continuously over 40-60 breaths per minute is concerning.

Restlessness

Pets in respiratory distress feel uncomfortable. They develop restless behaviors such as:

- Not settling into a comfortable position
- Lying down and getting right back up over and over
- Unwilling to lie flat
- Unable to put their heads down
- Needing to sit up or have their heads elevated

What to Say

Rather than stretching your vocabulary in efforts to describe pets' trouble breathing, simply say something like: "I'm worried about the way they are breathing." Make clear that your pet started panting and breathing faster/harder *at home*. That's important because veterinary teams often see faster breathing in the veterinary setting.

In dire situations, pets' tongue or gums turn purple, or they collapse. Mention that too, if it applies.



Respiratory Distress in Pets

Common Causes	Dogs	Cats	What to Watch For
Asthma		✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coughing • Wheezing • Open-mouthed breathing
Pneumonia	✓	✓ (but less common to develop aspiration pneumonia)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid breathing • Coughing • Unable to lie flat, instead choosing a more upright position • Standing with front legs slightly apart • Extra abdominal effort in breathing • Vomiting or seizure (in dogs)
Pleural Disease (fluid or air between the lungs and chest) — due to trauma, infection, cancer, or foreign body	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid and shallow breathing • Unable to lie flat, instead choosing a more upright position or with head elevated • Extra abdominal effort in breathing
Laryngeal Disease	✓ (laryngeal paralysis, especially in older, larger dogs)	✓ (possible tumor)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noisy, raspy breathing • Change in voice sounds
Trauma	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsettled behavior, including not feeling comfortable enough to rest or changing position often • Rapid and/or shallow breathing • Unable to lie flat, instead choosing a more upright position or with head more elevated • Extra abdominal effort in breathing
Pain	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid breathing • Unsettled behavior
Congestive Heart Failure	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid breathing • Unsettled behavior • Pale or blue gums, cough, and collapse
Cancer	✓	✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid breathing • Unsettled behavior
Pulmonary Hypertension (high blood pressure that affects the arteries in the lungs and the right side of the heart)	✓		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid breathing • Unsettled behavior • Cough, blue gums, collapse
Bronchitis		✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid breathing • Coughing • Unsettled behavior

