Home Care Of Spinal Fractures and Luxations

Post Surgical Care

Once your pet has had surgery for their injured spine, it will usually take 12-24 hours before we know how well things turned out. Unlike human patients, we can not ask our patients to “wiggle your toes” or “can you feel this” so post-operative neurological status can be difficult to determine until they are completely awake. High levels of pain medication also make your pet very groggy and they simply will not attempt to stand or walk until the medication wears off. If your pet had some neurologic damage pre-operatively, it can take several weeks or even months before they return to normal function. Often, even with the most delicate technique, anesthesia and surgical manipulation of the spine will worsen your pet’s neurologic status, but most of the time this is temporary and they will return to their pre-operative status within a few days. Rarely, a second surgery to control spinal cord swelling may be indicated if it was not done during the first surgery. This procedure is called a laminectomy and is only needed if we suspect spinal cord swelling or “pinching” of the cord from the injury or a pre-operative myelogram was done and it demonstrated that the spinal cord was swollen or compressed. It is not unusual for a pet that has had enough trauma to fracture or dislocate their spine to also have a traumatic “slipped disc” that can cause pain and paralysis apart from the damage to the bones.

The following instructions will be your guide to home care.

Weeks 1-3
Provide pain management with NSAID’s the first five days and antibiotics for the first week. Confine your pet to a small bathroom or crate or gated area with just enough room to move around comfortably. No running, jumping, playing or outside activity is allowed. Carry your pet outside two or three times daily to urinate or defecate. Decrease your pet’s caloric intake by cutting down the amount of food you normally feed by about one third since they will be burning up fewer calories than normal. Be sure to support both the front and rear of your pet when you pick them up. Be very careful doing this if they are still in pain as they will even bite their owner under these circumstances. Your veterinarian can show you how to humanely muzzle your pet if this is a problem so no one gets hurt. Failure to strictly confine your pet after surgery can cause the implants to fail and worsen your pet’s injury. If you need a nylon sling, I carry a small and large one for a nominal fee that you can purchase. Recheck with your doctor one week after surgery, sooner if you notice any swelling or
redness around the incision or pet stops eating or drinking or suddenly worsens neurologically.  
Sutures should be removed ten days after surgery.

**Week 4**  
Begin slow leash walks of less than 10 minutes three times a day with no further activities. You can allow your pet to have access to a larger area but no stairs are allowed and no jumping up onto couches or beds. A progress radiograph should be taken at this time to evaluate the implants and the healing of the spine.

**Weeks 5-6**  
Increase the slow leash walks to 20 to 30 minutes two or three times daily but nothing else.

**Weeks 7-8**  
Schedule another recheck with your doctor eight weeks after surgery to evaluate your pet’s progress and possibly take another radiograph.  
Take your pet on leash walks for 30 to 40 minutes two to three times daily and allow full run of the house as long as there are no large flights of stairs that they are prone to run up and down.

**Weeks 9-12:**  
At this point, your pet’s healing should be complete and should gradually return to full activity by the end of 12 weeks.

**Additional Instructions:**

Licking at the incision should be discouraged because it may lead to chewing at the sutures or staples causing a wound infection. It may be necessary to bandage the body or use an Elizabethan collar to prevent licking.  
Bandages, if used, should always be kept dry and clean. Any odors and/or persistent licking are indicators that there may be a potential problem and should be checked by your veterinarian immediately. Bandages and splints should be checked weekly by your veterinarian or veterinary technician.  
Feed your pet its regular diet but reduce it by 20-30% to allow for reduced activity.  
Mild swelling may occur near incision. Your veterinarian should check moderate or severe swelling or any drainage immediately.

**Complications**

As with any surgical procedure, complications can occur. Unlike human patients who can be confined to a bed, our patients do not know enough to slow down when they start to feel better, so restricted activity is a major responsibility of you, the pet owner. Failure to
follow these instructions carefully can lead to delayed healing or even failure of the implants.
The most common complication is delayed healing, where, despite our best efforts to stabilize the spine, individual patients respond slower than others. If your pet seems to have worsening pain or weakness in the limbs after going home, please notify me or your doctor right away. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask your veterinarian or call me at the number above.

**Follow Up Instructions:**

- Recheck in ten days: Sutures/Staples removal / Dissolving sutures
- Tegaderm clear bandage can be left on until it falls off or at suture removal
- Start antibiotic tonight
- Start pain medication tonight
- Call Rod Newman, MS, CCRP to schedule your initial physical therapy consultation at 615-414-4867 or email him at rnewman@caninerehabnashville.com (cost included in surgery fee)