

Prevent injuries when working with small animals

A guide for veterinary practices, groomers, kennels/daycare, and shelters

More resources

For more tips, see our compassion fatigue resource for more information (saif.com/S1055).

Keeping animals healthy is a big job—and not just when treating a 160 pound Great Dane! It can also be dangerous—which is why it's important to take time to review common hazards and how to prevent them.

Bites and scratches

These are the most frequent injuries in animal care, but they can be avoided. Not only are they painful, they can also transmit bacteria and cause tissue damage.

Here are a few ideas for preventing bites and scratches:

- Keep files updated with notes about aggressive or fearful animals.
- Wash hands well between seeing animals.
- Change lab coats or scrubs before seeing an unfamiliar animal.
- Set up designated rooms to decrease animal stress levels.

- Take classes on techniques for managing animals in crisis.
- Approach new animals with caution.
- Assess animals to determine whether it would be useful to have the owner in the room or not.
- Wear personal protective equipment when handling certain animals—examples include bite sleeves/guards, puncture-resistant gloves, or safety glasses/face shield. Consider appropriate use of breathable and flexible muzzles when necessary.

If you have been bitten, seek medical attention.

Strains and sprains

Strains and sprains are very common in all healthcare, including care for animals. Injuries can arise from lifting, moving, holding, or restraining animals. Aside from animal care, lifting bags of food or equipment can also cause injury.

Here are a few ideas for preventing strains and sprains:

- Set up areas and shelving with lifting, pushing, pulling, carrying, and holding in mind; design these areas to minimize stress and force.
- Use lift equipment to move larger animals or heavy materials.
- Ask for help when needed.
- Identify risk factors such as awkward postures, forceful body exertions, and repetitive motions and look for ways to reduce them.



- Use adjustable tables that can be raised and lowered as needed.
- Learn and practice proper lifting techniques and good body mechanics.
- When walking dogs, do not wrap the leash around your hand. If a pet pulls on the leash, it could cause wrist and shoulder injuries.

Stress and emotional overload

Those working with animals can experience a high level of stress—both physical and emotional. Exposure to pain and suffering throughout the day can lead to compassion fatigue, or vicarious trauma. It can often leave you feeling drained and unable to express emotions appropriately. Other disorders such as unhealthy coping mechanisms or depression are another possibility. Compassion fatigue can impact the ability to successfully perform at work, creating mistakes and a greater risk of injury.

Here are a few workplace strategies to manage stress and emotional overload:

- Support groups and open discussions/education about compassion fatigue at meetings
- Wellness programs—AVMA provides a model program for wellness (bit.ly/3X5vJRH)
- Mixing up appointment types (i.e. “happier” visits vs. emotionally demanding visits)
- Regular breaks and routine check-ins
- Counseling services
- Relaxation rooms, massage, meditation classes, etc.

Exposure to disease

Animals can spread disease to humans in any environment, but there is a great risk in an animal care environment because of the exposure to blood, saliva, urine, and feces. Preventing bites and scratches in the first place is the best way to prevent infection.

Here are a few other ideas for preventing exposure:

- Use universal precautions when in contact with any animal bodily fluids and treat them all as if they are infectious. Avoid contact by wearing medical gloves. Safety goggles or a face shield may be added if circumstances warrant.
- Frequent hand washing is one of the best ways to prevent disease. Wash them between every patient and before leaving for the day.
- Ensure areas with bodily fluids are cleaned immediately and disinfected with a full spectrum sanitizer.

Struck by

Another way to get injured while caring for animals is to be struck by falling material or the animals themselves. An animal patient in pain or short of air is more likely to cause these types of injuries, so proper restraint techniques are also essential.

Here are a few ideas for preventing struck by injuries:

- Use good housekeeping practices to reduce clutter—over-crowded shelves and tables can increase the risk of items falling.
- Keep records on aggressive animals and take appropriate countermeasures when needed.
- Take extra care with animals when working in small or enclosed areas.
- Communicate with one another when moving animals or when walking nearby while carrying loads.
- Use proper lifting and carrying procedures to minimize the risk of dropping items.

These are a few best practices for preventing the most common types of injuries when handling animals. Talking with co-workers about safety can improve your safety culture and may lead to some great ideas to improve the way you work.

