

# Animals & Disasters

Our animal companions are a lot like us. When something frightening happens, their (and our) natural instinct turns to "fight or flight." Disasters are no exception. Many animals choose to run away in an attempt to find safe ground, while others become aggressive or even violent.

Here are some steps that you, as an animal owner, can take to be prepared for your companion and help them get through the initial "crisis" period.

## Have an Animal Disaster Kit

We talk about disaster kits for our families, our vehicles, and our workplaces, but often times we forget about our pets. An animal disaster kit will look fairly similar to a human kit, so it shouldn't be too difficult for you to put one together. Some things to include:

- Water, enough for at least 3-5 days; different size animals have different needs, so if you're not sure how much to stock, ask your vet
- Dry or canned food, enough for at least 3-5 days (again ask your vet if you're not sure); rotate it out every two months
- For household pets: a leash and harness—harnesses are more secure than a regular collar, from which a frightened pet can wriggle out
- Bags for waste disposal (if you don't want to buy special pet waste bags, save the bags from your produce when you come home from the market)
- For cats, disposable litter pans (such as foil roasting pans) and at least a week's worth of litter
- A blanket (for scooping up frightened pets)
- Animal-specific first aid kit—if you have different types of pets, one for each type; ask your vet what to include
- Spare medications, if your pet takes them—rotate them out of your kit every time you get new
- Feed and water dishes
- A cage or pet carrier for each pet
- Recent photos of each of your pets, in case you become separated
- Up-to-date copies of your pets' medical records

- For cats: a pillowcase or "EvackSack," toys
- For dogs: a long leash, sturdy tie down stake, toys and chew toys, at least a week's worth of cage liner
- For birds: catch net, at least a week's worth of disposable cage liner (more if your birdcage does not have a perch), spray bottle
- For reptiles: hot water bottle, sturdy bowl in which your pet can soak
- For small animals (gerbils, hamsters, etc.): salt lick, extra water bottle, hide tube, at least a week's worth of bedding

## Transportation

If you have to evacuate, don't leave your pets behind—if it's not safe for you, it's not safe for them. As mentioned earlier, animals' "fight or flight" response will often make them aggressive in their efforts to get away to someplace safe. To ensure that your pets stay safe and to minimize the chances of injury to them or you, keep in mind the following:

- Cats will try to claw their way out of anything holding them, including your arms. A good sturdy pillowcase (the one in your kit) is an easy way to transport a scared cat to a carrier: turn the pillowcase inside-out, put your arms inside, scoop up the cat and turn the pillowcase right-side out, and hold it closed at the top, away from scratching claws.
- Dogs (even normally timid ones) may try to bite, so consider keeping a muzzle in your kit. Choose a soft one, such as leather, to minimize your pet's discomfort.
- When transporting caged animals, keep them in their normal cage unless absolutely necessary to transport them in something else. The familiarity of their environment will provide some comfort among the fear from all the new and unknown things going on.
- In cold weather, birds should be transported with a blanket over their cage to help keep them warm. You may want to do this even in warm weather, as it can help reduce the stress of

travelling. Lizards can be transported in the same manner.

- For horses, remember that just like our kids do fire drills in school, our horses need to do trailering drills as well. If you expect new behavior from your frightened horse during a disaster, you or the horse (or both) may end up getting seriously injured.
- Make sure that your horse trailer's tires are in good condition and at the proper tire pressure, and that the lights on your trailer work. Also make sure that your towing vehicle is rated for the combined weight of the trailer and your horse(s)—many accidents happen because the towing vehicle can't handle the weight.
- Snakes can be transported in a pillowcase, but make sure you have a secure cage or terrarium at your destination.
- All animals are going to be scared. If possible, try to socialize your pet with strangers and familiarize your pet with the smell of disaster workers, such as firemen whose clothes may smell like smoke. Take your dogs and cats (on leashes with harnesses!) to a local fire station to introduce them to the personnel, or invite a local fire crew to come meet your horses. Ask them to wear their normal gear so the animals can get used to the smell.

### **Designate a Caretaker**

If you're not home when a disaster strikes, your pets won't have you to help reassure them. Add on the fact that you may not be able to get to your home for several days, even weeks, and your animals could likely die from injury or starvation. Therefore, it is important that you designate a trusted temporary caretaker in the event that you're not home during an emergency.

Your designated caretaker should be someone who lives nearby, and that you can trust with a key to your residence. If possible, find someone who has animals too, so that they'll be familiar with their care. In addition, they should be likely to be home when you're not, such as a retired couple that is home during the day while you're at work. If your caretaker has an "opposite" schedule to yours, such as someone who works at night, consider trading duties with each other. Have a backup plan in place in case your caretaker goes on vacation, gets sick, etc.

Also consider designating a permanent caretaker. This is a more difficult decision, since it's for if something should happen to you, whether during a disaster or due to other causes. Select someone with whom you would want your animals to live. Make sure that your animals are familiar with the person and their family or other pets. The person you select as your permanent caretaker should have a clear understanding of what your expectations are, what your pets' special needs are, and any special likes or dislikes, and be willing and able to meet those expectations and needs.

### **Some Other Things to Consider**

- If emergency officials recommend that you stay in your home, consider crating your animals for their safety. This is particularly important during fires and periods of aftershocks, since the smell or the shaking can cause animals to panic and try to run.
- Microchipping your pets is a simple and permanent way to locate them should they escape and get lost. Microchips are tiny devices, implanted in the shoulder area, that can easily be scanned at most animal shelters. The ASPCA recommends microchipping for all pets.
- Make sure that your pets always have current tags on them. Tags should include the pet's name and a current phone number, as well as any important medical information (such as severe allergies to medicine, diabetes, etc.). Also have your pet wear the tag from the vet or the County shelter about its most recent rabies shot (if applicable). For birds, this information should be on the leg band. Update the tags or leg bands whenever the information changes, such as if you change your phone number. Replace missing tags or bands right away.

For more information, visit the following websites:

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA): <http://www.asPCA.org>

American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) - Disaster Preparedness: <http://www.avma.org/disaster/>

Humane Society, Emergency Services: [http://www.hsus.org/hsus\\_field/hsus\\_disaster\\_center/](http://www.hsus.org/hsus_field/hsus_disaster_center/)