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## **First aid; understanding the signs and symptoms**

An astute animal owner knows when their animal is compromised and will often be able to associate an earlier experience with this insight eg. The dog who has eaten a rotting carcass who is off their food and vomiting or the cat who was heard in a cat fight the night before and is now limping.

Having a good working knowledge of what signs to look for to determine if your animal's health is at risk is a very helpful investment. By observing your animal's vital signs (breathing rate and depth, colour of mucous membranes, heart rate and temperature) regularly when they are healthy will help you to detect an abnormality.

Subtle signs of illness might include a quiet or depressed demeanor, poor appetite, heavy eyes and a dull coat. Other more obvious indications of dis-ease include rapid or difficult breathing, elevated or depressed pulse or heart rate, collapse, pale or bright red colour of the gums, difficulty walking or severe lameness, yelping out in pain, sudden bloating of the abdomen, severe vomiting and diarrhea as well as blood loss.

Some of these signs and symptoms are fleeting and pass quickly while others persist and might indicate a serious underlying problem. Always have Rescue Remedy or Emergency Essence on hand, and if the animal isn't settling, seek veterinary advice. There are a number of basic diagnostic tools to apply that will help you and your vet or vet nurse to assess how urgent veterinary input is in any given situation.

Heavy or rapid breathing are important indicators of pain or distress. Especially if the animal's gums are blue or purple with abnormal breathing, they aren't getting enough oxygen and they are likely to have damage to the respiratory system which might be in their lungs, circulation or red blood cells not transporting enough oxygen around.

If they're having difficulty inhaling, the problem is probably in the upper airway but if it is difficulty exhaling then the lower airway is likely to be dis-eased or damaged. Pale gum colour might indicate shock or anaemia and red gums will indicate severe congestion or septicemia.

A very valuable tool to indicate good circulation and hydration status is called the capillary refill time (CRT). Identify a part of the gum which is pink, ideally above the canine teeth. Use a thumb to press it briefly with some light pressure. It will momentarily turn white and should turn pink again within two seconds. If this time is delayed beyond this then there is likely to be a serious problem.

An animal's core temperature is another valuable tool used to assess their status. A low temperature indicates poor circulation while a slightly high temperature may be an indicator of pain and a severely elevated temperature is likely to indicate major infection.

The heart rate is influenced by most of these factors and will be elevated with high temperature, rapid breathing and pain or stress. A persistently elevated or depressed heart rate with none of the above influences requires further investigation.