



Referral Animal Hospital, P.A.

**DAVID T. CROUCH, DVM**  
DIPLOMATE, AMERICAN COLLEGE OF VETERINARY SURGEONS

## **Nursing Care of the Paralyzed Pet**

As you are aware, your pet may be permanently paralyzed for life. However, in most instances this paralysis is only temporary and your pet may gradually regain the ability to walk and control its urine and bowel movements over a period of time. Naturally, the larger your pet, the more difficult its nursing care will be for you. You have an important responsibility during this convalescent period to see to the needs of your paralyzed pet and try to avoid significant health complications (e.g. pneumonia, urinary tract infections, bedsores, etc.). The following is a list of helpful hints that may ease the burden of this care.

**Food and Water:** Your pet will probably be more thirsty than usual due to the steroid medication (Prednisone, Prednisolone). Have a water bowl within reach at all times! Naturally, the more your pet drinks, the more it will need to urinate, so you will have to clean your pet and bedding often. Your pet will also be very hungry as a result of the steroids. Do not overfeed! Any name brand diet is adequate.

**Decubital Ulcers (Bedsore):** Ulcerations may develop on the skin over pressure points. These ulcers heal very slowly and may lead to severe generalized infection. It is best to prevent them by keeping the skin dry and free of urine and feces. This may require daily bathing. Desitin ointment (over the counter-pharmacy) may be applied to areas of irritation or redness that develop. A soft padded surface should be provided for a bed. Clean blankets over a foam rubber pad or egg-crate mattress provides adequate bedding. Blankets may need to be changed daily. Confinement in a small area is mandatory until your pet is able to walk well without assistance. A playpen is ideal for this purpose, as is an airline flight cage or a portable fence for show dogs. (Try pet stores, R.C. Steel or hunting dog catalogs, etc.).

**Urination:** Severe bladder infection (cystitis) often occurs due to your pet's inability to fully empty its bladder. It is best to prevent this problem, since cystitis is difficult to cure in the paralyzed pet. The best way to prevent infection is to fully empty the bladder at least 3 or 4 times daily. To accomplish this, apply gentle steady pressure with both hands on the abdomen with your pet in a standing position. If your pet is urinating on its own it is not necessary to do this. The good news is that your pet's ability to control urine function (continence) usually returns before limb function. Placing diapers on your female pet works well if your pet seems to be constantly leaking urine. Just cut a hole out of it for the tail and wrap it around the waist. *Depends* absorbent pads sometimes work better than diapers for male dogs.

**Defecation:** This is not usually a problem. Your pet should have 1 to 2 unassisted bowel movements daily. If constipation occurs, mix ¼ teaspoon of Metamucil (obtain over the counter at your local pharmacy) per 15 pounds of body weight into the food twice daily. In rare instances, enemas may be necessary.

**Medication:** Give all medication as directed and until finished. Antibiotics are used to prevent cystitis and steroids are used to minimize swelling of the spinal cord. The steroids will cause an increase in appetite, thirst, and frequency of urination. These side effects will go away as the dose of these drugs decreases to once daily.



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**Sutures:** Sutures should be removed in 10-14 days following surgery. This can be done by your local veterinarian or by Dr. Crouch, whichever is most convenient. We need to re-examine your pet four weeks following surgery to assess its neurologic status and give you an accurate assessment regarding your pet's chance for recovery and the degree of recovery your pet should attain. Typically, by one month following surgery we would expect to see a significant improvement in your pet's neurologic status. As a general rule, the more rapidly function returns, the better your pet's ultimate function becomes.

**Hydrotherapy:** A daily 10-15 minute swim in lukewarm water may speed recovery time by encouraging the patient to use the paralyzed limbs. This also stimulates urination and defecation, gives the pet some exercise, and helps keep the coat clean. This should not be done until all sutures are removed. **Remember, your pet is paralyzed and cannot swim by itself!** You must support it in the water. Jacuzzis or spas are ideal!

**Towel Sling:** With your pet in a standing position, place a towel under and across the abdomen close to the hind legs and support the weight of your pet's hindquarters by holding the ends of the towel above its back. With the toes barely touching the ground, walk your pet around for 10-15 minutes 2-3 times daily. This is a form of physical therapy for the hind legs and may stimulate your pet to urinate. This is also an effective way to move your pet around the house, as they are fully capable of walking with their front legs if someone supports the hind limbs. Alternatively, cut two holes in a large beach towel and drop the hind legs through them, holding the towel above your pet's back.

**Physical Therapy:** The paralyzed pet tends to always sit with their hips flexed. This results in a contracture of the hip muscles, which may prolong or prevent recovery. Hip extension exercises are beneficial. Bicycling exercises and massage of the hind limb musculature also enhance blood flow to the paralyzed limbs. Please ask for a demonstration on how to perform these exercises. Typically, these are begun following suture removal two weeks postoperatively.

If you notice any problems such as blood in the urine or bowel movement, problems with the suture line, vomiting, decreased appetite, depression, etc., please call. We are available to answer questions on evenings and weekends as well as via our voice mail system. Please leave a message and a member of our staff will return your call as soon as possible. Thank you for trusting us with the care of your pet.