

ABDOMINAL SURGERY- POST-OPERATIVE AND INCISIONAL CARE

Good at home post-operative and incisional care after an abdominal surgery is very important, as serious complications can occur. Patients typically look and want to act quite normal just days after an abdominal surgery, even though their body has certainly not had enough time to heal. Keeping these patients relatively quiet for at least 2 weeks after surgery thus becomes important. Dogs should be leash-walked only for short periods and no rough play with other dogs allowed. Dogs and cats should be kept from jumping up/down on/from high surfaces, running up steps or any other activity that puts tension on the incision. Excess tension can lead to dehiscence or opening-up of the incision and potentially a surgical emergency.

The incision should be monitored for redness, swelling, oozing, heat or pain to the touch. Any of these signs may indicate an incisional infection. Veterinary attention should be sought as soon as possible. Avoid putting triple antibiotic ointments or other topical substances on the site, as these often just draw the pet's attention to the area and may initiate licking. Missing skin sutures or staples should prompt a re-examination as soon as possible, especially during the first several days post-op.

Any licking or chewing at the incision site by the patient (or house mates) must be avoided. An E-collar worn at all times and potentially confinement from other pets may be necessary for 10-14 days, until the sutures/staples are removed. Skin irritation or infection and potentially opening-up of the incision can result.

Typically, dogs and cats will have a relatively normal appetite within a few days of surgery. Failure to regain an appetite can mean discomfort or surgical complications could exist. Cats, in particular, cannot tolerate anorexia for long periods. They are predisposed to developing severe liver disease (hepatic lipidosis/fatty liver) within days of complete anorexia. Appetite stimulants and/or a temporary feeding tube may be necessary. Dogs can technically do OK for longer periods without eating, but we generally do not want to let this go, because of the potential for anorexia being a sign of other complications. Likewise, vomiting or diarrhea can indicate underlying complications and should be addressed right away.

Signs of severe abdominal pain (lethargy, hiding, a hunched posture, guarding the abdomen, whining/crying) beyond several days of surgery are generally not expected and may be a sign of complications. Infection in the abdominal cavity/peritonitis is one such complication. Aggressive therapy is indicated in this situation.

In short, post-operative monitoring and care extends far beyond discharge from the hospital. Any abnormalities noticed by the owner should be brought to the attention of the pet's veterinarian or a local emergency service. Although severe complications of general abdominal surgery are typically uncommon, they can occur and may be devastating when they do. Keeping the pet quiet and erring on the side of safety cannot be over-stressed.