

General post operative care for fractures

Your pet has sustained a fracture (broken bone). The purpose of the skeleton is for support and your pet lost this support when the fracture occurred. Fortunately, the body has the ability to restore the broken bone if proper healing conditions are present. The purpose of surgery was to reduce (align) the broken bone and stabilize (fix) the fragments. The stabilization was achieved with a stainless steel implant(s). The type of implant used will vary depending on the type of fracture.

Your part in the post operative care is as important as the surgery itself. You have invested a substantial amount of money in your animal and it is to your benefit to do everything possible to protect this investment and the well being of your pet. Small degrees of movement at the fracture site may hinder the healing process. Of course the purpose of the implant is to prevent this movement, but if the patient is allowed too much activity too soon, movement at the fracture site will occur. In fact, the implant may loosen or break with continued stress and the benefit of the surgery will be lost.

General care of the patient is important and the skin incision should be checked daily for signs of irritation or drainage. If problems are noted with the surgical site contact your veterinarian immediately. Please avoid cleaning the incision of particles of dried blood. This is uncomfortable to the patient and unnecessary. Occasionally a patient will excessively lick the sutures. This in itself will cause irritation and drainage. If this occurs, an Elizabethan collar (looks like a lamp shade) may be required. Sutures can be removed 10-14 days following surgery by your veterinarian. Certain fractures, especially those close to a joint, require physical therapy during the immediate post-operative period to prevent joints from stiffening. Your veterinarian will advise you on the necessity of physical therapy and how best to administer it.

Early in the post operative period, the pain and discomfort your animal experiences will cause it to limit its own activity. However, as the swelling and pain decreases (generally 2-4 weeks) your animal will want to increase its activity. It is extremely important to remember that the bone has not healed at this time and most stresses are still absorbed by the implant. You must continue enforced rest and supervised exercise. As a rule of thumb you should restrict your pets exercise to short leash walks only for 8 weeks following surgery. When the animal is unsupervised it should be confined to a crate or small room to limit running and jumping. We realize that enforced rest becomes more difficult as healing progresses, but you must continue this practice until x-rays document fracture healing. X-rays to assess the healing response will be made 4-6 weeks following surgery and every 4-6 weeks subsequent to this until final healing has been verified. Most fractures heal by 12 weeks following surgery, although the time to healing varies according to age of the patient, severity of the break, and the location of the fracture.

The surgical implants in your pet are made of a non-reactive stainless steel. Generally, surgical implants are left in the animal following healing and cause no problems. However, on occasion these implants will need to be removed if they cause the animal discomfort, become infected, or are limiting return of function. More severe breaks or those involving the joint or nerve damage may result in residual functional deficits long term. Return to normal activity is noted in the majority of animals following repair and healing of an uncomplicated fracture.