



POST OPERATIVE CARE for Small Mammals

From routine procedures like spays, neuters, and dental exams, to more intense operations like tumor removals and cystotomies, there are numerous reasons our beloved small pets may need surgery. Regardless of why your companion has surgery, proper at-home post-operative care is an important part of the healing process. The thought of caring for your little one in a delicate state can be stressful, but these tips and suggestions will provide an idea of what to watch for and will help ensure your beloved companion recovers as smoothly and quickly as possible.

Before you leave the hospital:

When you pick your little one up after surgery, speak with your veterinarian or vet tech before you leave. Though your vet will have answered most of your questions before the procedure, it's never a bad idea to verify instructions and check off the following questions as they're answered:

- ☐ How long is recovery time?
- ☐ Is there an incision? What does it look like?
- ☐ Are there external sutures, staples, or drain tubes that will need to be removed?
- ☐ When should I bring my pet for a recheck?
- ☐ What constitutes an early recheck?
- ☐ Has my pet eaten since waking?
- ☐ Is a supplemental diet during recovery recommended? If not, why?
- ☐ Who should I call if there is an emergency?

Why is post-op care so important?

As prey species, your small mammal is hardwired to hide signs of illness or discomfort. While this mentality prevented your pet's wild ancestors from succumbing to predation, it can also mean many things can go wrong for a post-operative small mammal before they start showing any blatant signs or symptoms. Luckily, if they are observed closely, it is easier to pick up on the subtle indications that something isn't going to plan. A properly supervised at-home recovery also ensures your pet can heal in a familiar environment, thereby limiting stress and lowering the risk of secondary health concerns (like gastrointestinal stasis).

As a devoted pet parent, it isn't unusual to feel a twinge of guilt or anxiety about putting your pet through a surgical procedure and the road to recovery that follows. It often helps to remember that animals, even our beloved prey species, are often quick to recover, and with proper post-op monitoring, will bounce back in a relatively short period of time.



Keys to post-op care

Healing from surgery is hard work! During the post-operative phase, the body goes into overdrive repairing muscles and ligaments, forming new neuropathways, and evading infection. Every post-op patient requires focus in six areas during the first few weeks of recovery.

1. MENTATION

“Mentation” means how an animal responds to their environment. Are they bright and alert, or “loopy” or “out of it?” Are they tense and quiet? Very lethargic and difficult to wake up? After surgery, it’s common for pets to be sleepier than usual for the first 24 hours. They should still be easy to wake, frequently eating, and appropriately responsive to sounds in their environment.

2. APPETITE

Injectable sedatives and anesthetic gases can cause nausea and disorientation shortly after operations. Because rabbits and rodents are incapable of vomiting, a decreased appetite may be the only sign your pet exhibits to indicate they’re experiencing tummy troubles.

Even though your pet should have enjoyed a post-op meal before leaving the hospital, closely monitor your pet’s food and water intake. If you notice your pet’s appetite or thirst starts to decrease, or if they stop eating or drinking altogether, contact your vet right away.

3. OUTPUT

Like appetite, it’s just as important to keep an eye on your little one’s output (urination and defecation) after surgery. Do their stools look normal? Have they been passing a normal volume, or more, or less? Are they urinating as often as they should? Does their urine look dark or smell pungent? Is your small herbivore able to consume their cecotropes? If anything out of the ordinary is noted, quickly notify your vet office.

4. MEDICATIONS

Your veterinarian may have provided analgesics (pain meds) and/or antibiotics. Both can cause upset stomach and stool abnormalities; pain meds can also cause profound sedation (sleepiness). Careful monitoring of mentation, appetite, and output is so important for this reason.

When administering medication, monitor your pet’s reaction. Are they loopy? Do they seem comfortable? Do they fight you with every dose? It’s best to finish a script as written, otherwise the medication won’t be as effective; if your pet isn’t handling medicine well, speak with your vet. They may adjust dosing or provide an alternative.

5. SURGICAL SITE

While you should limit handling your pet for the first few days after surgery, you’ll need to check the incision at least twice a day. The skin should be dry; moist, sticky skin can be a sign of a skin infection. The incision should be free



Always contact your vet if you have post-op questions or concerns.

from debris (scabs, hay, bedding, etc.). It’s normal for a bit of serosanguinous fluid (a thin fluid consisting of blood cells and serum) to leak from the wound for the first day or two after surgery. This fluid is usually pale yellow with a pink tint. It shouldn’t have an odor or be sticky or thick.

If you notice any of the following on or near the incision, call your vet immediately:

- Bright red, irritated skin
- Red streaking radiating from the incision
- Obviously visible blood, especially if it’s dripping
- An unpleasant odor
- Thick white, yellow, or green discharge
- The incision is hot to the touch
- The incision is coming apart

Also contact your vet if your pet excessively grooms the incision area. Your pet may need an e-collar when they’re not directly supervised.

6. HUSBANDRY

Your little one needs a safe, clean, and warm space to recuperate. Monitor your pet’s bedding for blood, spots of abnormal urine, or loose stools. This recovery area should be spot-cleaned at least once a day to remain sanitary. If your pet free-rooms, keep them confined to a smaller area (like a play yard) while they heal. This will encourage them to take it easy and prevent accidental self-injury.

If your post-op pal is in a bonded pair or group, it’s generally best they return to the enclosure and have the support of their best buds while they heal. Small mammals can usually monitor their own activity post-op and will remain calm until their body has healed enough to safely return to normal activity. If you’re worried that keeping your pet with their friends will impact recovery, you can separate them until a vet indicates it’s safe to keep them together. Make sure they can still see, smell, hear, and interact with each other by using separate play yards or a temporary enclosure divider.