

Electrical Cord Injuries in Small Mammals

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As the holiday season approaches, many of us are eager to share the festivities with our four-legged family members. Certain foods, (chocolate, poultry bones) and plants, (lilies, mistletoe), are widely known as potential dangers for them, but there is one serious concern that is often overlooked: electrical cord burn injuries.

Electrical burn injuries in companion animals can result in anything from minor to fatal injuries depending on factors including but not limited to electrical current, pathway, and exposure time. Clinical signs are usually found in the heart, mouth, and skin.

Animals under six months of age are the most likely to sustain burn injuries from electrical cords. Puppies are more likely than kittens to chew live electric cords.

The most common type of injuries are burns of the tissue in and around the commissures (corners of the mouth). The degree of burn injuries is categorized into one of the following groups: superficial; superficial, partial-thickness; deep partial-thickness; and full-thickness. Partial-thickness injuries can develop into full-thickness injuries eventually, as skins releases retained heat gradually.

Other symptoms may include coughing, collapse, rales, (“crackling” sound in the lungs), pulmonary edema, (excess fluid in the lungs), pulmonary hypertension, (high blood pressure in the heart and lungs), seizures, and death.

An animal with a suspected electrical burn injury needs to receive proper medical care. If you witness your pet chewing on an electrical cord that is plugged into an outlet it is imperative to unplug the cord first. This is done to avoid personal injury. It is then safe to transport your pet to the nearest veterinary care facility.

A full physical examination should be performed by a veterinarian. A veterinarian may recommend additional testing including complete blood count (CBC), serum chemistry, urinalysis, electrocardiography (ECG), and chest radiography (x-rays). These tests help determine the extent of injury.

Pain management could be necessary for burns, and more severe burns may require surgery to remove dead or dying tissue. Supplemental oxygen is typically used in patients with heart or lung damage. Medications may be used to control excess lung fluids and arrhythmias (irregular heartbeat).

To prevent electrical cord injuries, live electrical cords should be kept as far away from pets as possible. One important step that can be taken to prevent such injuries is to dispose of any damaged electrical cords. Cords with exposed wire are especially likely to make contact. Methods of baby-proofing may also prove effective in keeping cords from pets.

Electrical cord burn injuries, while thankfully uncommon, can be life-threatening to pets.

Preventing electrical cord burn injuries is far more inexpensive and easier than treating them. However, if you suspect your pet has been injured it is important to seek veterinary care in a timely manner.