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PERMANENT TRACHEOSTOMY CARE

What is it? A permanent tracheostomy is an opening in the neck into the trachea or windpipe that is surgically created to allow an animal to breathe while bypassing the upper airway. It is made by cutting a hole in the trachea and suturing the lining of the trachea directly to the skin of the underside of the neck.

What animals need this? Animals that have laryngeal paralysis that do not respond to the normal surgical treatments for this condition, those with laryngeal collapse, or those with severe trauma or a cancerous processes that disrupts or blocks the upper airway/larynx preventing them from breathing normally may need a permanent tracheostomy.

What initial care is needed? Right after creation of a permanent tracheostomy, your pet will need to be hospitalized for a few days. Initially, there is quite a bit of swelling and drainage at the site, and we have to ensure it remains patent. The lining of the trachea is not used to encountering room air without it first having being humidified, warmed and “filtered” by the mouth, nose and upper airways. After several days the trachea starts to adapt to its new environment, and the secretions decrease. Until this adaptation occurs, the site is cleaned and suctioned several times a day, and we use anti-inflammatory medications, antibiotics and nebulization to help decrease inflammation, infection and irritation to the trachea. This process is very important since a mucus plug can block the airway and cause respiratory distress or suffocation just as easily as covering the hole with your hand. It is also very important that the site not be traumatized while healing—they cannot scratch at it. Scratching can cause excessive scar tissue to form, which can make the opening too small to be functional. If excessive scar tissue forms, the site will need to be revised.

What long term care is needed? Long term, the site should be kept clean and free of hair; the underside of the neck may need to be kept clipped short. Also if the animal has excess skin in the neck region or is overweight, skin tucks may need to be done since a big flabby skin fold can cover the tracheostomy site and block air-flow. In general, the pet should be protected from extremes in temperature. Very hot humid weather and very cold dry weather can be more difficult for them to tolerate.

What are the possible complications or risks? In addition to obstruction of the tracheostomy, the biggest risks involve aspiration or drowning. After permanent tracheostomy, pets **must not be allowed** to swim and great care must be taken when they are being bathed. If more than a little bit of water gets into the tracheostomy, and therefore the trachea, the pet could drown. It is also important to protect them against aspirating grass lawns and other foreign objects. It is advised to lightly cover the tracheostomy site with a bandana or light, permeable wrap when they are outside or taking walks. Trauma to the site either by scratching at it or from external sources must also be avoided. If the site strictures or becomes too small over time to allow good airflow, it may need to be revised.

What is the prognosis? Prognosis for pets with a permanent tracheostomy is very good, as long as it is cared for properly and the underlying disease necessitating it is treatable.