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Working Dogs – Dr. Shane Turner, DVM

The joys of having a dog in the family are well known. They provide loyal companionship, unconditional love, and security to their families. They are the eyes or ears of their owner sometimes and they can provide emotional support for their owners as well.

In addition to their family duties, dogs provide important services to their communities. Working dogs are found in the military, law enforcement and search and rescue agencies, as well as a variety of other settings. Some of their responsibilities require them to be placed in dangerous situations where they are at risk for traumatic injuries, exposure to toxins and exertion related injuries.

Almost all working dogs have some risk associated with exertion; heat stroke and dehydration amongst the most common problems. Handlers are trained to be able to recognize symptoms of heat related injury and dehydration. Hydration is monitored by assessing physical parameters like the moisture on their gums or their skin turgor. Dehydrated dogs will have dry gums and increased skin turgor and dogs with heat exhaustion will excessively pant and have bright red gums. If these symptoms are seen, first aid is administered. Mild dehydration can be treated with administration of oral fluids and rest while more severe dehydration or exhaustion will often need treatment with intravenous fluids and external cooling methods to help restore hydration and cool the body temperature.

The harsh environments that lead to exhaustion and exertion also often pose risks for musculoskeletal trauma. Fractures, lacerations and abrasions of the paw pads are common problems. Paw pad injuries are often a concern because of the rough surfaces they are required to walk on and the length of time they work. Booties are commonly used to avoid injury, and periods of rest to allow for adequate recovery. In cases of fractures or wounds, a handler is trained to perform first aid on the wounds to clean, control bleeding and stabilize or protect them until the dog can be seen by a veterinarian.

In some dogs, blunt trauma, gunshot wounds, shrapnel wounds and other penetrating injuries are possible. Blunt trauma is a common injury in dogs and can cause severe injury. Fractures, injuries to the lungs, traumatic brain injury and abdominal organ trauma are all common injuries associated with blunt trauma. In many cases of blunt trauma, injuries are not immediately visible. Handlers can use gum color, respiratory rate and effort, heart rate and pulse quality, mentation assessment and neurologic function tests to determine the presence or absence of these injuries.

Many working dogs risk exposure to toxins. Police dogs are trained to detect both narcotics and chemicals used to make explosives. When ingested or inhaled many of these substances can be toxic. Common drugs that cause toxicity in working dogs are opioids, cocaine and methamphetamine. Opioids have an antidote, called naloxone, which handlers may carry to help treat toxicity prior to presenting to a veterinarian. Other methods of decontamination, like induction of vomiting, administration of activated charcoal and topical decontamination are used in the field.

Handlers and their dogs often develop a close bond. Most working dogs will eventually become their handler's family pet after they retire. Some dogs require long term medical care after retirement. Some organizations have set up funds to help with their medical care. If you are interested in learning more about these funds or working dogs in general, additional information can be found at these sites.

<http://www.wspca.com/retired-police-dog-medical-fund/>

<http://www.seattle.gov/police/about-us/about-policing/k9>