

Assessing Dehydration through Skin Elasticity in Dogs & Cats

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Q. How does a veterinarian assess if a pet is dehydrated?

A. One way to assess hydration in an animal is to lift the skin over the animal's shoulder and watch how fast it goes back to its normal position. In a normal, healthy animal, if the skin between the shoulders is lifted up and then released, the skin will pop back to its normal position immediately.



In dehydrated animals, there is less fluid in the skin and it is less elastic. When lifted off the back, the skin of a dehydrated animal will not immediately fall back to its normal position. If a pet has lost 6-8% of its normal fluid, there will be a definite delay in the skin returning to its normal position. If the pet is 10-12% dehydrated, the skin will actually look like a tent and not go back to its normal position. Signs of shock may be evident. If a pet is over 12% dehydrated, it is an extreme emergency.

Other ways to assess dehydration are to examine the mucous membranes (gums); they should be moist. In a dehydrated animal, the eyes may appear sunken in. In very dehydrated animals the heart rate may be increased, but the pulse would be weak.