

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of a cat's face, focusing on its eyes and nose. The cat has a white blaze on its face with brown and black tabby markings around the eyes and on its ears. Its eyes are a light greenish-yellow color and are wide open, looking directly at the camera. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white.

Veterinary – burns from heat mats

Think carefully about the quality of any heating equipment you purchase.

Case

A cat suffered significant burns to its hip when left on a heat mat to recover after surgery. The cat's fur was still wet, which exacerbated the risk of a burn occurring. The wound subsequently became infected and required many weeks of treatment. The client successfully claimed compensation for the additional treatment costs.

This incident was entirely preventable and serves as a timely reminder of the importance of closely monitoring animals post operatively. In this instance, the cat was unable to change position in response to the heat. Not surprisingly, the incident caused much embarrassment to everyone in the practice.

Tips for practice improvement

- Think carefully about when to use heat mats. Remember 'heat mats' can include wheat packs, hot water bottles and electric mats. Explore other ways to keep animals warm and prevent hypothermia. Wet animals in particular, are at risk of burns as wet surfaces transfer heat more readily.

Hypothermia is thought to be the major cause of peri-anaesthetic mortality, so its prevention is critically important.

Putting a heat source such as an electric pad or blanket underneath an animal in an otherwise cool environment is neither a safe nor an effective means of preventing or treating hypothermia. It is much safer and more effective to warm the environment.

The safest form of external heat source is either a hot air blower with associated blanket, which can go under or over the animal (a number of brands are readily available; one example is Bair Hugger); or a circulating warm water blanket. Both can be used during surgery or dentistry, as well as during recovery.

- As a sedated animal is unable to change position in response to the heat, veterinary staff must monitor the animal regularly. That is, the animal must be reviewed every few minutes, as the situation can change quickly. This involves inspecting and feeling the surface of the animal for any signs of increased heat.

- Remember to document in the post-operative notes each time you have checked and re-positioned the animal.
- All heat mats and hot air blowers should only be used according to the manufacturer's instructions. They should also be inspected regularly for any damage or worn surfaces. Develop a schedule for regularly checking all equipment and recording each time this is done.
- Think carefully about the quality of any heating equipment you purchase. While cheaper equipment or products may be tempting, they could prove more costly in the long run. Only purchase from reputable suppliers and ensure each product is accompanied by clear operating instructions from the manufacturer.
- Educate all staff about the safe use of heating equipment.