

# Reporting animal cruelty

## Do you know what you must do in Massachusetts?

If a veterinarian knows of, or suspects: failure to provide adequate care, non-accidental injury, animal sexual abuse or organized animal fighting, they **MUST report it to the police in the community where the animal maltreatment is believed to have occurred**. Veterinarians may also call the law enforcement department of the MSPCA or the Animal Rescue League of Boston to make this report. Here are some FAQs to help with decision making:

**Q:**

Does a veterinarian have to report at the first encounter?



**Answer:**

It depends. In a case of poor care, a veterinarian has the latitude to counsel first. Reporting should occur if there is a lack of followup, or failure to improve the condition. Injuries consistent with non-accidental trauma should be reported right away.

**Question:**

Can a veterinary technician, veterinary student, receptionist or other staff report suspicions of animal cruelty? Do we have the same civil immunity as veterinarians?



**A:**

Anyone can make a report of suspected animal cruelty, but you don't have the same protections.

**Q:**

Do I have to tell the client I am making a report?



**Answer:**

You may want to ask if they have any reason to suspect someone may be hurting their animal on purpose. In other situations, you may want to avoid raising the subject. These sensitive conversations require tact & care. If you aren't sure, you may confer with colleagues before proceeding.

**Question:**

Won't reporting have the unintended consequence of keeping animals out of the hospital, never to receive care?



**A:**

No. When pediatricians became reporters of suspected child abuse, they raised similar concerns that did not pan out.

**Q:**

Do I have to ask permission to report my suspicions of animal cruelty?



**Answer:**

No. If you are a veterinarian in MA, you must report your suspicions. No one else can make that judgement for you. Confer with colleagues as needed to help with your reasoning process, but you are the one who must make the report when indicated. It is a good idea to inform the hospital director or manager of any reports made.

**Question:**

What about AMA (against medical advice) discharges, are they acts of animal cruelty?



**A:**

If an animal is going to suffer unnecessarily, then yes, that is animal cruelty.

**Q:**

The client hurt an animal, but they did not mean to. Should I report it?



**Answer:**

Massachusetts animal cruelty law is one of general, not specific intent. If the client meant to do the harmful act, and it caused the animal unnecessary suffering, they have broken the law. They don't have to have the specific intent of harming the animal to break the law. True accidents do not need to be reported.

Veterinarians are encouraged to fill out [the supplemental reporting form](#) & submit this written report to the entity where the telephone report was made as a follow up. Any veterinarian who fails to report an act of animal cruelty shall be reported to the board of registration. Veterinarians report suspicions; investigators decide whether to file charges. Don't you be the one to prevent an animal or person from getting needed help! Want to discuss a potential case? Call Dr. Smith-Blackmore at 617.293.8183.