

COLD WEATHER PET SAFETY

Information provided by the AVMA (American Veterinary Medical Association)

Know the limits: Just like people, pets' cold tolerance can vary from pet to pet based on their coat, body fat stores, activity level, and health. Be aware of your pet's tolerance for cold weather, and adjust accordingly. You will probably need to shorten your dog's walks in very cold weather to protect you both from weather-associated health risks. Arthritic and elderly pets may have more difficulty walking on snow and ice and may be more prone to slipping and falling. Long-haired or thick-coated dogs tend to be more cold-tolerant, but are still at risk in cold weather. Short-haired pets feel the cold faster because they have less protection, and short-legged pets may become cold faster because their bellies and bodies are more likely to come into contact with snow-covered ground. Pets with diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, or hormonal imbalances (such as Cushing's disease) may have a harder time regulating their body temperature, and may be more susceptible to problems from temperature extremes. The same goes for very young and very old pets. If you need help determining your pet's temperature limits, consult your veterinarian.

Stay inside: Cats and dogs should be kept inside during cold weather. It's a common belief that dogs and cats are more resistant than people to cold weather because of their fur, but it's untrue. Like people, cats and dogs are susceptible to frostbite and hypothermia and should be kept inside. Longer-haired and thick-coated dog breeds, such as huskies and other dogs bred for colder climates, are more tolerant of cold weather; but no pet should be left outside for long periods of time in below-freezing weather.

Check the Paws: Check your dog's paws frequently for signs of cold-weather injury or damage, such as cracked paw pads or bleeding. During a walk, a sudden lameness may be due to an injury or may be due to ice accumulation between his/her toes. You may be able to reduce the chance of iceball accumulation by clipping the hair between your dog's toes.

Wipe down: During walks, your dog's feet, legs and belly may pick up deicers, antifreeze, or other chemicals that could be toxic. When you get back inside, wipe down (or wash) your pet's feet, legs and belly to remove these chemicals and reduce the risk that your dog will be poisoned after (s)he licks them off of his/her feet or fur. Consider using pet-safe deicers on your property to protect your pets and the others in your neighborhood.

Prevent poisoning: Clean up any antifreeze spills quickly, as even small amounts of antifreeze can be deadly. Make sure your pets don't have access to medication bottles, household chemicals, potentially toxic foods such as onions, xylitol (a sugar substitute) and chocolate.

Provide Shelter: We don't recommend keeping any pet outside for long periods of time, but if you are unable to keep your dog inside during cold weather, provide him/her with a warm, solid shelter against wind. Make sure that they have unlimited access to fresh, non-frozen water (by changing the water frequently or using a pet-safe, heated water bowl). The floor of the shelter should be off of the ground (to minimize heat loss into the ground) and the bedding should be thick, dry and changed regularly to provide a warm, dry environment. The door to the shelter should be positioned away from prevailing winds. Space heaters and heat lamps should be avoided because of the risk of burns or fire. Heated pet mats should also be used with caution because they are still capable of causing burns.

Recognize problems: If your pet is whining, shivering, seems anxious, slows down or stops moving, seems weak, or starts looking for warm places to burrow, get them back inside quickly because they are showing signs of hypothermia. Frostbite is harder to detect, and may not be fully recognized until a few days after the damage is done. If you suspect your pet has hypothermia or frostbite, consult your veterinarian immediately.