

When It's Cold Outside

As we go about our wintry business, shoveling snow, going for a brisk walk on the beach or just racing from car to home, we have prepared ourselves for the adversity and stresses of cold weather. However, it is important to remember that certain categories of pets have special needs during this time of year, and all animals can suffer from hypothermia and frostbite in the worst of conditions.

Common sense goes a long way in determining when a pet should be protected from the cold. Breeds like the Newfoundland, Husky and Saint Bernard love the cold. When in good health, only extremes in climate change will affect them. Make sure your companion pet does not have a special need in relationship to the cold. The geriatric patient has far less tolerance and it is always a good idea to have a recent medical examination to evaluate what stresses should be avoided. Conditions like heart disease, kidney failure, diabetes and hormonal imbalances can compromise your pet's ability to regulate their temperature and adjust to temperature changes.

When you walk your animal companion, when it gets too cold for you, consider the conditions the same for her. Small pets will find themselves immersed in snow and will require special attention. Those pets with short coats will require coats in very cold weather. Locally, many pet stores like Pet Smart and Petco carry coats, as well as the pet departments in discount stores like Walmart and Target. The Dog Spa has some pretty snazzy choices too. However, clothing alone is not always a safe alternative in extreme cold. Dogs lose most of their body heat through their paws, ears and respiratory tract.

Beware of certain dangers that exist because of special circumstances created by the cold. The cat that snuggles up against a warm car engine is at risk as it will not be seen by the driver starting a car, and a frozen pond or lake creates a hazard to the dog running off-leash during a thaw. Once an

animal falls thru the ice, it is very difficult to get out, so pay special attention when near frozen bodies of water and keep pets on a leash.

There are unusual threats that exist inside the home during cold spells. The space heater and the fire place can create a hazard to the dog or cat that snuggles up to them, failing to realize that a paw or tail could get burned. The potential of knocking over a space heater is something that pet owners should be aware of.

When outdoors, there are certain symptoms which may indicate that frigid conditions are causing a problem. If he or she whines, shivers or stops moving, your dog may be feeling the effects of hypothermia (below normal body temperature). Never leave a dog unattended outside when the mercury drops. It is obvious that sources of water could be unavailable and worse, serious conditions such as hypothermia and frostbite can occur.

Hypothermia occurs when a pet's body can not regulate it's temperature due to extreme cold and drops below normal. Depression, shivering and an unwillingness to walk will be seen. As her temperature falls below normal she will breathe more slowly, her heart rate will slow and she will respond to stimuli slowly. Pets that show these symptoms should immediately be taken into a warm environment and wrapped in a blanket with a hot water bottle or with an electric blanket.

A less common condition is called frostbite. It occurs in pets and people when the body is exposed to extreme cold. In an attempt to protect itself, the circulatory system shunts blood from the extremities into the core of the body for warmth. Deprived of the movement of blood, ice crystals form in the paws, ears and tail. These crystals damage the tissue. If you suspect frostbite, immediately bring your pet into the warmth and soak the affected parts in warm water for 20 minutes. Do not rub the suspected areas as this will cause tissue damage.

Once you have done the above, take your pet to your veterinarian. She or he will administer pain medications and possibly antibiotics.

The winter is a great time to share outdoor activities with your pets. For many of us, it serves as an incentive to leave the warmth and comfort of our homes and discover the joy of walking a solitary beach or feeling the pleasure of a brisk walk in the woods. With a little care and forethought, the risks of the cold can be prevented.