

Cold-Weather Solutions for Dogs

Dog owners are urged to act now to protect their pets and homes from winter weather.

Posted: December 11, 2007, 5 a.m. EST

Your dog's winter coat is not enough to shelter him from extreme cold. According to the California Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA), pets can be extremely vulnerable in the winter months if they are exposed to cold weather and potentially dangerous elements found in and around their owners' homes.

"Cars, antifreeze, heaters and wood stoves can be death traps for animals if pet owners are not careful," says Dr. Jeff Smith, president of the CVMA. "Even inside a house or apartment, though it may be warmer, dangers are present. Anything with an electrical cord or heat source, which may provide extra warmth for humans in the winter, may be dangerous to the average pet."

The CVMA asks that pet owners heed the following warnings when it comes to protecting their pets from a cold environment: Keep antifreeze away from pets. Dogs and cats like the sweet taste and smell of the chemical, but ethanol glycol-based antifreeze is highly poisonous. That's why some states have required that a bittering agent be added to antifreeze to make it taste unpleasant. Bang on your car before starting the engine. Outdoor cats often will curl up into the wheel wells and engine compartments for warmth and they could get trapped. Don't play near frozen lakes, rivers or ponds. People and pets alike risk slipping in and drowning. Protect animals from wood stoves and portable heaters. Cats can jump on top of them, causing burns to their paws. Keep nails clipped. Shorter nails allow for better traction on icy surfaces. Provide plenty of fresh water. Your dog is just as likely to get dehydrated in the winter as in the summer. Snow is not a substitute for water. Wind chill makes days colder than what the actual temperature might show, so you should limit your pet's time outdoors.

Veterinarians say that, if at all possible, it's best to keep pets inside and ensure they stay warm, especially at night. If an animal must be kept outside during the day, make sure it is given proper shelter, food and water. That means: Providing a doghouse large enough to allow the dog to sit and lie down comfortably, but small enough to hold his body heat. Positioning the doghouse out of the wind or placing it on a raised platform for warmth. Covering the floor with cedar shavings or straw and changing the bedding regularly. Blankets are not recommended as they will just get wet and freeze. Giving outdoor pets more food because they will need more energy to stay warm. Using plastic food and water bowls rather than metal to keep containers from freezing. Darker colors are recommended as they will absorb more heat.

The CVMA cautions that in the wintertime, pets also can be more susceptible to illness. Frostbite can be a hazard, especially for animals not offered proper housing. The tips of the ears, tail and feet are particularly susceptible. If a pet owner suspects his or her pet has been exposed to a poisonous substance or is experiencing a sudden drop in body temperature, call a veterinarian immediately.

Winter can pose special risks to many household animals, and consulting your veterinarian about a pet's needs early on can keep everyone safe and healthy during this holiday season.