

Heatstroke 101

Leslie Sinclair, DVM explains why dogs are so susceptible to heatstroke and how you can treat the deadly condition.

Leslie Sinclair, DVM

If you think a dog is suffering from heatstroke, don't hesitate to take action. First, get him out of the heat and into a shady area or indoors as quickly as possible. Then assess his condition. Is he standing, still conscious, and panting? If he's just begun to suffer the effects of heatstroke, move him into a cool area and offer him frequent small amounts of water. Take his temperature (see Vaccines and Routine Care: How do I take my dogs temperature?). If his body temperature is 104° F or lower, keep him in a cool environment, watch him closely, and continue to offer sips of water. Don't let him drink a large volume; he'll only vomit, contributing to dehydration. Once he has calmed down and cooled down, call your veterinarian to discuss whether the dog needs an examination.

If the dog is unable to stand, unresponsive (doesn't seem to hear you or know you are there), or experiencing seizures, provide immediate care. Check to see if he is breathing, and feel his chest to determine whether his heart is beating. Have someone contact a veterinary hospital and make arrangements to take him there while you move him into a cool area and take his temperature. If it is above 104° F, begin cooling him by soaking his body with cool-not cold-water. Use water-soaked towels or a spray hose. Concentrate on the head and neck, and the areas underneath the front and back legs. You can carefully rinse and cool the tongue, taking care not to let water run down the throat, where it might enter his lungs. After only a few minutes, stop and take his temperature again. Once he has cooled to 104° F, stop the cooling process. Further intentional cooling may lead to blood clotting or even a low body temperature, since he is unable to properly control his thermal system. Take him to a veterinary hospital immediately, even if he appears to be recovering.

- Back to the First-Aid Area -

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