

January 17, 2008

Cold Weather Advisory for our Pets

Cold weather can be hard on pets, just as it can be hard on people. Moreover, with this weekends temperatures expected to plummet well below the freezing mark, Chicago weather, can be even tougher.

Sometimes owners forget that their pets are just as accustomed to the warm shelter of the indoors as they are. Some owners will leave their animals outside for extended periods of time, thinking that all animals are adapted to live outdoors. This can put their pets in danger of serious illness. **Chicago Veterinarian, Dr. Tony Kremer**, says there are things you can do to keep your animal warm and safe.

Keep your pets inside as much as you can when the mercury drops. If you have to take them out, stay outside with them. When you're cold enough to go inside, they probably are too. When the temperatures dip below the teens and into the single digits, leaving them outside for any significant length of time can pose severe risks. If they are outside for any length of time, make sure they have a warm, solid shelter against the wind, thick bedding, and plenty of non-frozen water. Try leaving out a hot water bottle, wrapped in a towel so it won't burn your pet's skin.

Some animals can remain outside safely longer in the winter than others. In some cases, it's just common sense: long-haired breeds like Huskies will do better in cold weather than short-haired breeds like Dachshunds. Your pet's health will also affect how long she can stay out. Conditions like diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, and hormonal imbalances can compromise a pet's ability to regulate her own body heat. Animals that are not generally in good health shouldn't be exposed to winter weather for a long period of time. Very young and very old animals are vulnerable to the cold as well. Regardless of their health, though, no pets should stay outside for unlimited amounts of time in freezing cold weather. If you have any questions about how long your pet should be out this winter, ask your veterinarian.

As a reminder, cats will curl up against almost anything to stay warm--including car engines. Cats caught in moving engine parts can be seriously hurt or killed. Before you turn your engine on, check beneath the car or make a lot of noise by honking the horn or rapping on the hood. If you live near a pond or lake, be very cautious about letting your rambunctious dog off the leash. Animals can easily fall through the ice, and it is very difficult for them to escape on their own. If you must let your dogs loose near open water, stay with them at all times.

Pets that go outside can pick up rock salt, ice, and chemical ice melts in their foot pads. To keep your pet's pads from getting chapped and raw, wipe her feet with a washcloth when she comes inside. This will also keep her from licking the salt off her feet, which could cause an inflammation of her digestive tract.

Feed your dog additional calories if it spends a lot of time outdoors or is a working animal. It takes more energy in the winter to keep body temperature regulated, so additional calories are necessary.

Be particularly gentle with elderly and arthritic pets during the winter. The cold can leave their joints extremely stiff and tender, and they may become more awkward than usual. Stay directly below these pets when they are climbing stairs or jumping onto furniture; consider modifying their environment to make it easier for them to get around. Make sure they have a thick, soft bed in a warm room for the chilly nights. Also, watch stiff and arthritic pets if you walk them outside; a bad slip on the ice could be very painful and cause a significant injury.

Go ahead and put that sweater on Princess, if she'll put up with it. It will help a little, but you can't depend on it entirely to keep her warm. Pets lose most of their body heat from the pads of their feet, their ears, and their respiratory tract. The best way to guard your animals against the cold is keeping a close eye on them to make sure they're comfortable.

When you're outside with your pets during the winter, you can watch them for signs of discomfort with the cold. If they whine, shiver, seem anxious, slow down or stop moving, or start to look for warm places to burrow, they're saying they want to get back someplace warm.

You can also keep an eye out for two serious conditions caused by cold weather. The first and less common of the two is frostbite. Frostbite happens when an animal's (or a person's) body gets cold and pulls all the blood from the extremities to the center of the body to stay warm.

The animal's ears, paws, or tail can get cold enough that ice crystals can form in the tissue and damage it. The tricky thing about frostbite is that it's not immediately obvious. The tissue doesn't show signs of the damage to it for several days.

If you suspect your pet may have frostbite, bring her into a warm environment right away. You can soak her extremities in warm water for about 20 minutes to melt the ice crystals and restore circulation. It's important that you don't rub the frostbitten tissue, however--the ice crystals can do a lot of damage to the tissue. Once your pet is warm, wrap her up in some blankets and take her to the veterinarian. Your veterinarian can assess the damage and treat your pet for pain or infection if necessary.

Winter can be a beautiful time of year. It can be a dangerous time as well, but it certainly doesn't have to be. If you take some precautions, you and your pet can have a fabulous time taking in the icicles, the snow banks, and the warm, glowing fire at the end of the day.