

Preventing Frostbite – Keeping Pets Safe



Nothing beats a day in the snow with your dog. Watching that bounding ball of joy hop through the snow banks puts all the fun back into winter. But how do you know when the cold is too cold? Frostbite and hypothermia are nothing to sneeze at – in pets or humans – so it’s important to know the warning signs and be prepared. The most important thing you can do to protect your dog or cat is to know your pet. Pay attention to your dog.

[See Preventions, Signs and Treatment.](#)

Watch your pet when she’s out in the winter to see if she shivers and when – on days you would call cool? Cold? Freezing? Or maybe just shady? Knowing how your pet, with its distinctive coat, how they manage the cold, will help you be better able to prevent frostbite and hypothermia.

Dog and cat coats are like the coats we wear in many ways. They both trap body heat close to the skin. Since the air we breathe is usually so much cooler than our 98.6-degree body temperature, this layer of extra-warm air right next to the body is critical to keeping our internal heat up. This is why dressing in layers is so important, and it also explains why thick, breathable garments like sweaters work so well. When a dog or cat starts to get cold, its hairs stand up, almost “on end.” In the same way that we get goose-bumps on our skin, dog and cat skin reacts by stiffening the hairs to thicken the coat.

Signs of Frostbite and Hypothermia

If the animal's core temperature continues to fall, it will start shivering involuntarily, just like we do when we're cold. Our bodies shiver by reflex in an attempt to heat us up and raise that core temperature. If an animal keeps getting colder still, even after it starts to shiver, the body could restrict blood flow to the extremities (ear tips, face, tail, feet, etc.) in an effort to keep warm blood in the core organs. When this happens, frostbite – tissues that freeze and then die – can occur. Many animals with frostbite also suffer from hypothermia.

Any pet that's outdoors in bitterly cold or sub-zero temperatures could develop hypothermia, a condition that can lead to shock, loss of consciousness, and even death. Symptoms include unresponsiveness, a blue tinge to the skin, and ice or snow on the extremities.

Prevention

1. **Know your pet** | To prevent these conditions, it's important again to know your pet. Is your dog a big, hairy beast that can loll in the snow for hours without one sign of discomfort? Or do you have a small, short-haired dog that shivers on a cloudy day? A temperature-sensitive dog would surely appreciate a coat or parka and maybe even foot-gear in the height of winter, to ward off shivers. Dogs with thick coats are often able to play in the snow and ice without ever suffering from the cold. As we've seen, the key is to watch for shivering, the first sign that the animal's body temperature is too low and that it needs to be taken inside or warmed up right away.

2. **Dress for success** | If you have a small dog or a dog with short hair you can increase your pet's comfort by putting on a warm coat and boots. Even sled dogs wear boots so, with a little bit of training and treats you can teach your dog to walk in snow boots. Once they get used to them they'll dash off into the snow or rain with warm dry feet.

Treatment & When to Get Help

If you think your pet has frostbite or hypothermia, call a veterinarian right away. In the case of frostbite, do not rub snow on your pet. Instead, get your pet inside right away. Once inside, get a bowl of warm water to soak the affected paw or ear in. Wrap your dog in a blanket and try to keep it warm and calm – it can be painful as the skin warms up. Avoid rubbing or touching the frost-bitten area.

The reaction to hypothermia is essentially the same – keep your pet as warm and dry as possible and call your veterinarian. In addition to wrapping the dog in blankets, you might heat a massage bag or a ziplock full of raw rice in the microwave, wrap it in a towel, and place it next to your pet. Be careful not to put anything too warm on a dog or cat's skin – in their exhausted state, they might not react and could end up with burns.

Caution:

Once you have these heating devices in place, get your pet to a veterinarian. Since ***it's also important not to overheat an animal, it's vital that you see a professional*** who has the tools to monitor your pet's temperature.