

Taking care of pets in cold weather

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KUSA (Denver) - With the cold snap on the horizon for Colorado, many pet owners may want to just snuggle up with their kitty or puppy in front of the fireplace. But, before you cuddle with your furry buddy, make sure to observe these important winter weather pet tips.

Cold weather can be hard on pets, just like it can be hard on people. 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. There are things you can do to keep your animal warm and safe.

- **Take your animals for a winter check-up** before winter kicks in. Your veterinarian can check to make sure they don't have any medical problems that will make them more vulnerable to the cold.
- **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. If you absolutely must leave them outside for a significant 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. Cats and small dogs that have to wade shoulder-deep in the snow will feel the cold sooner than larger animals. 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.
- **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.
- If you light a fire or plug in a space heater to keep your home toasty warm, **remember that the heat will be as attractive to your pets as to you.** As your dog or cat snuggles up to the warmth, keep an eye out to make sure that no tails or paws come in contact with flames, heating coils, or hot surfaces. Pets can either burn themselves or knock a heat source over and put the entire household in danger.
- **It's a good idea to have your furnace checked for carbon monoxide leakage before you turn it on,** both for your pets' health and your own. Carbon monoxide is odorless and invisible, but it can cause problems ranging from headaches and fatigue to trouble breathing. Pets generally spend more time in the home than owners, particularly in the winter, so they are more vulnerable to monoxide poisoning than the rest of the family.
- **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.
- **If left alone outside, dogs and cats can be very resourceful in their search for warm shelter.** They can dig into snow banks or hide under porches or in dumpsters, window wells, or cellars, and they can occasionally get trapped. Watch them closely when they are loose outdoors, and provide them with quality, easily accessible shelter.
- **Keep an eye on your pet's water.** Sometimes owners don't realize that a water bowl has frozen and their pet can't get anything to drink. Animals that don't have access to clean, unfrozen water are more likely to drink out of puddles or gutters, which can be polluted with oil, antifreeze, household cleaners, and other chemicals.
- **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. *Hypothermia*, or a body temperature that is below normal, is a condition that occurs when an animal is not able to keep her body temperature from falling below normal. It happens when animals spend too much time in cold temperatures, or when animals with poor health or circulation are exposed to cold. In mild cases, animals will shiver and show signs of depression, lethargy, and weakness. As the condition progresses, an animal's muscles will stiffen, her heart and breathing rates will slow down, and she will stop responding to stimuli. If you notice these symptoms, you need to get your pet warm and take her to your veterinarian. You can wrap her in blankets, possibly with a hot water bottle or an electric blanket--as always, wrapped in fabric to prevent against burning the skin. In severe cases, your veterinarian can monitor her heart rate and blood pressure and give warm fluids through an IV.

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.

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