

Ask the Vet: How do I care for my pet during cold weather?

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With the extremely cold weather we have had recently, many pet owners may be concerned about keeping their dog or cat healthy in these conditions. Common sense goes a long way in managing the cold. When the cold and wind make it unbearable for you, your pet is probably not happy either. Let your dog out for a quick potty break rather than taking them on long walks. Some smaller dogs may be trained to use a pad and therefore can avoid going outdoors all together. When bringing your dog back in, dry them off thoroughly and clean their paws as salt or other contaminants may be irritating to their feet, and potentially poisonous if licked off. Sweaters and booties are also available for many sized dogs and may be helpful in extreme cold. Remember that your pet is used to a controlled environment of 60 to 70 degrees if living in the house also. Puppies as well as older and debilitated dogs are less able to handle the cold.

Animals used to living outside are much more able to handle the cold, but they may also need some special attention as temperatures dip down below zero and winds pick up. Provide your animals with a protected environment out of the wind and off the cold ground. You may need to bring them into a garage or other insulated building, and provide them with a blanket or straw to lay on. Try to keep them dry as much as possible as a wet hair coat sucks the heat away from the body much faster and is unable to insulate them effectively. Also be aware that cats will try to find a warm place to stay, even if that is under the wheel well or under the hood of your car. Severe injuries can occur if they get caught in a fan blade or decide to abandon their ride while you're driving down the road.

Frostbite and hypothermia are real threats to animals during the winter just as they are to people. Toes and ears can be frostbitten if animals are outside for an extended period of time or have to walk through deep snow. Watch for gray, cold extremities, shivering, or lethargy, and don't be afraid to call your veterinarian if you are concerned. Pets that get loose during the winter often have more trouble finding their way back home and severe conditions can be deadly to a lost pet. Therefore, keep your dog on a leash or contained.