# Stories From Our Clinic: Cats & Frostbite

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*

We were having an early winter in the Northwoods, as we sometimes do. It was only October 28th and a bitter wind was already blowing and heavy, wet snow from Lake Superior had covered the ground. Neither we, nor our clients, nor their pets were prepared for it.

It came four days too early for one client, Betty, who lived out in the country, religiously kept her cat, Dweezle, indoors from November 1st until April so he would not suffer the effects of the cold. The client called us up the day before Halloween to tell us that her cat had been caught outside overnight in the storm, and Betty had found him that morning huddled beside the garage nearly frozen.

The bitter cold could have caused any cat to experience hypothermia - or worse. Since Betty lived so far from the clinic and since the roads were still icy and we knew Betty would not panic, we asked her some questions about Dweezle's condition. Was he shivering? Were his extremities (legs, ears, tail) cold? Was he lethargic? Since the cat was exhibiting all of these conditions, we asked Betty to wrap him in warmed blankets and to bring him right into the clinic. We advised her not to rub or massage any area of the cat's body. Often, an owner's first instinct is to plunge the cold animal in hot water, but this is the worst thing to do. We strongly suspected that at the very least, Dweezle was suffering from hypothermia and possibly frostbite.

When Betty and Dweezle came in, we were ready with warm towels and blankets. We drew blood to check his glucose level, and started warm IV fluids. His glucose level was low, so we also added dextrose to his IV fluids. We also gave warm water enemas to warm his body core, not just his skin.

Once Dweezle was warmed up and his body systems were working normally, we kept him at the clinic so we could observe any changes in the parts of his body most likely to be frostbitten - the ears, the tail, and the feet. Initially, areas damaged by frostbite appear normal. Within 48 hours, though, the damaged tissue will swell and become painful. Within seven days, due to interruption of the blood flow and nerve supply, the affected tissue dries up and turns black, eventually falling off twenty to thirty days later.

Minor cases of frostbite involve only ear tips, whereas more extensive freezing may cause the loss of tail, toes, and even

**ABOUT FROSTBITE**

Frostbite is a term used to describe the damage to tissue due to exposure to severely cold temperatures. Healthy animals can withstand sub-zero temperatures if they are dry and out of the wind; therefore, frostbite is more likely to occur if an animal has no shelter or is injured. We generally see frostbite more often in cats than in dogs.



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limbs. Death may result if the limbs are involved. Dying tissue attracts bacteria, and severe, life-threatening infections can result. Pain relief medication and antibiotics are usually prescribed.

Luckily, Dweezle survived unscathed except for the tip of one ear, which makes him look forever curious! He is now permanently indoors - his owner has decided that the outside may be too dangerous for her furry companion and she wants to keep him close to her and his past winter ordeal only a distant memory.



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