

Cold Weather - Outdoor Safety

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Hypothermia is a major concern during cold weather. Inadequate shelter, calories, or becoming wet can make a pet much more susceptible to this condition. There are additional indoor and outdoor hazards associated with cold weather. We hope this article will help you become more aware of how you can keep your dog comfortable and safe during the cold weather season.

Outdoor housing

Make sure [doghouses](#) are not too large. A correctly sized doghouse should allow your dog to comfortably lie down and that is it. A doghouse that is too large will not provide proper insulation to keep your dog warm and frostbite on tails and tips of ears can occur in severely cold weather. Preferably, the doghouse will be placed on top of styrofoam insulation and the dog will have a [mat or bed](#) inside the doghouse.

Pets that are outside in cold weather will need extra calories to keep warm. When the temperature is below freezing, you may need to increase calories by as much as 30%, depending on the pet and housing conditions.

Shivering is a sign your pet is too cold and indicates the start of hypothermia. A shivering pet should be slowly warmed until signs of hypothermia are gone.

Provide your pet with fresh, unfrozen water available at all times. Avoid stainless steel or metal bowls; instead, use heated buckets or bowls.

Walking in the cold

Sidewalk ice melters like salt, magnesium, or calcium chloride can cause irritation to paws and are toxic when ingested causing stomach upsets, and if enough is ingested, nerve damage. To prevent salt from hurting your pet's feet, we recommend using [dog boots](#) and a nontoxic ice melter for your own sidewalk. If your pet has walked on a salty area, wipe off his paws with a moist towel.

Snowballs can be fun unless they are between the toes. Snow collecting between the toes of dogs can be very painful, and if large enough, obstruct blood flow to the toes. Help your pet remove these collections of snow while you are out walking. [Dog boots](#) would help eliminate this problem.

Thin ice on lakes is hazardous for people and animals. Keep your pet away from lakes or other bodies of water which may have thin ice.

In the northern United States, remember that snowmobile trails can be dangerous places. Be sure to keep your pets off of the trails.

Ice on walks is not only dangerous for us two-legged creatures, but for our four-legged friends as well. Slipping on the ice is of special concern for older dogs who may already be stiff due to arthritis.

Keeping warm

Speaking of arthritis, as in people, cold can increase the discomfort of arthritis. Providing an [orthopedic bed](#) in a warm part of the house, using a dog [sweater](#), and providing some indoor exercise can help arthritic pets be more comfortable.

During the cold winter months, many people use space heaters and woodburning stoves. Do not allow unsupervised pets in areas with space heaters which could be bumped over by the pet. Placing [Scat mats](#) on the floor may also be helpful in keeping pets away from stoves and heaters.

Antifreeze

Antifreeze should be out of pet's reach. Antifreeze, which contains ethylene glycol, is extremely poisonous; a few teaspoons can be lethal. Its sweet taste attracts pets and ingesting even a tiny amount causes fatal kidney toxicity. So, when tuning up your car for that holiday trip, make sure your pet does not have access to antifreeze containers and clean up any spills immediately. If you think your pet has consumed antifreeze, contact your veterinarian immediately. Time is of the essence.