

Preparing Your Pets for Winter – A Synopsis

We are used to thinking about winterizing our vehicles, but those of us who share our lives with animals must remember to 'winterize' our pets as well! Colder winter months can pose special health risks to pets. Help your special furry friends weather the winter by considering a few simple tips.



Is antifreeze really a deadly poison?

Antifreeze (ethylene glycol) has a sweet taste that many animals find irresistible. Unfortunately, it only takes a small amount to cause permanent and fatal damage to the kidneys. Never drain antifreeze into the street, be careful to wipe up any spills, and store antifreeze in tightly closed containers far out of the reach of pets (and children). There is no antifreeze product available that is truly safe.

My dog has a thick coat. Do I need to be concerned about windchill?

Windchill combined with dampness, rain, sleet, or heavy, wet snow can be fatal. It is best not to leave any dog outdoors unsupervised when the temperature drops. Cold, wet, windy snowstorms can often come up both quickly and unexpectedly. Shorthaired, very young, and senior dogs are at greatest risk for problems related to exposure to cold.

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A dog is happiest and healthiest when kept indoors, going outside to relieve himself, go for a walk, or play a game of fetch with his owner. If, however, your dog must live outside, protection from the elements is critical. An insulated doghouse is a must. It should be elevated a few inches above the ground to prevent moisture from accumulating inside. Carpeting, a blanket, or a padded bed should cover the floor of the doghouse. It must be big enough for your dog to stand up, lie down, and turn around comfortably, but small enough to contain body heat. The doorway of the doghouse should face away from prevailing winds, and burlap or canvas hung over the opening can act as a 'door'.

Outdoor dogs need more calories in the winter just to keep warm. Talk to your veterinarian about a specific dietary recommendation (and portion size) in order to ensure that your pet is meeting his energy requirements. Adequate water is just as important to an outdoor dog's health as food; check it frequently to make sure it does not freeze.

Are pet paws delicate? Do I need to do anything specific to protect them?

Pet paws, like human hands and faces, are susceptible to frostbite. Remove caked ice from your dog's feet as soon as possible. Frostbitten skin may turn color, becoming reddish, gray, or white. It may become scaly and begin peeling. If you suspect frostbite, thaw out the affected areas slowly using warm, moist towels that are changed frequently. Have your pet evaluated by your veterinarian as soon as possible to determine the extent of the damage.

Salt and other chemicals that are used to melt snow and ice have varying degrees of toxicity. Their effects depend upon the ingredients and the amount ingested. These chemicals can burn the pads of a pet's feet. If the pet then licks its feet to clean them, the mouth maybe burned too. Wipe your pet's feet off with a damp towel after any exposure. Read the labels of the products you use and take all recommended precautions.

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Common sense can guide most of the decisions you make as you keep pets out of harm's way during the upcoming winter months. Consider the consequences as our furry family members face the frigid cold.

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