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How to Keep Your Pets Safe in Winter

From frostbite to flu, winter brings seasonal hazards for dogs, cats, birds, reptiles and even fish

By Matt Alderton, AARP | 2
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Coats and booties can protect from the weather as well as dangers poisonous to cats and dogs such as antifreeze and deicers.

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Unless you're the type of person who spoils your pet, the idea of dressing dogs in fluffy coats and neon boots probably seems silly. In the thick of winter, though, outerwear on pets isn't pampering — it's protection, says Rover.com veterinary medical adviser Rebecca Greenstein, a veterinary practice owner in Toronto.

"Pet owners, through no fault of their own, sometimes overestimate their pets' cold tolerance," Greenstein says. "They figure, 'Oh, they're animals. They're covered in fur. They must be heartier.' And that can sometimes be a quite dangerous assumption."

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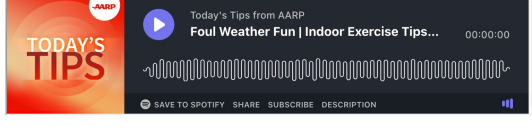
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That's true of not only dogs but also cats and other common pets, including birds, fish, even reptiles. Keeping all of them safe in winter requires that pet owners be vigilant about seasonal risks and quick to mitigate them.

Limit their outdoor time as much as possible. Like humans, pets can suffer from hypothermia and frostbite, extreme cases of which can lead to illness, disability or even death. For that reason, it's important to keep pets indoors when temperatures are at or below freezing, says veterinarian Heather Berst, medical lead at the animal health company Zoetis.

"Be sure to bring your pets inside overnight, and during the day they need to be watched when outside in the cold," advises Berst, who says smaller dogs, pets with thinner coats, and younger and older animals are especially vulnerable.

Provide protection if pets can't or won't come inside. Even pets that spend much of their time outside should come inside, if only for the night. If they won't — an outdoor cat who doesn't come when you call, for instance — you need to provide it with protection, Berst says. For outdoor cats, she suggests putting out a cat shelter filled with towels and bedding in which to burrow. You can purchase shelters or create your own out of a plastic tote, a foam cooler and some straw. For dogs, an insulated and well-sealed doghouse may provide protection for short periods, but experts recommend all dogs come indoors when temperatures reach freezing.

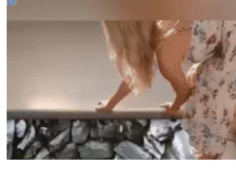


Make sure they have access to drinking water. It's essential to ensure that outdoor pets have easy access to drinking water, advises veterinarian Grant Little, of Arlington, Neb., a veterinary expert on the website JustAnswer. "One of the things you need to be careful about is animals that rely on outside water sources that are prone to freezing," he says. "If you have outside barn cats or porch cats, you need to make sure their water source isn't freezing for long periods of time. I currently have this issue present with it being single digits in Nebraska. I am outside every day multiple times to check the water and dump any ice and refill it if it's running low."

Keep the thermostat warm enough for pets. To save money on utilities, many people dress in layers and keep the heat low or turn the heat way down when they leave the house. But because pets can't decide to throw on a sweater like you can, it's important to be mindful of your thermostat.

"Your pets will be happy indoors at the same temperatures we keep our houses at in the winter — 60 to 70 degrees" Fahrenheit, Berst says.

Don't forget your fish, bird and reptile friends. Fish owners may need to increase the temperature on aquarium heaters, while owners of birds, reptiles and amphibians might need to upgrade pet enclosures with additional heat and humidity sources, including drippers and foggers, suggests licensed veterinary technician Amanda Fredal, director of live pet care at the retailer Pet Supplies Plus.



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Don't forget other types of pets when it gets cold. Fish, reptiles and other pets need to stay the right temperature too.

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"Pets that enjoy tropical environments ... need to maintain a tropical environment, even in the winter," she says. "For exotic pets [like birds, fish and reptiles], a drafty window or area in the home must be avoided. It may not be an issue in other seasons but could become a real health risk to your pet. Keeping a thermometer in the area of an exotic pet's enclosure can help identify drafts that must be addressed."

And make sure they don't get too hot. "Be careful of fireplaces and space heaters," Berst says. "Pets may like the feel of the heat and get too close and get burned. They could also knock over a space heater and cause a fire... Consider putting up fencing or blocks so they can't reach heaters or fireplaces."

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Take care to prevent slipping on ice and heavy snowdrifts. Senior dogs, especially, can slip on icy surfaces and sustain serious injuries, Fredal says. And even moderate snowdrifts can pose serious dangers for small dogs that can't get out of them, Berst notes. Keeping a path cleared for walks and bathroom breaks is critical.

Avoid frozen bodies of water. Ponds, rivers and lakes can be deadly for pets who fall through the ice, Greenstein says. Because bodies of water can be invisible under snow, it's best to keep pets on leash at all times, says Lindsey Wolko, founder and CEO of the Center for Pet Safety, who says off-leash pets are more prone to getting lost in winter because snow can cover up the scent cues they might otherwise use to navigate home.

Check your car engine. Cats may seek shelter in warm nooks and crannies — like automobile engines. "You want to pound on the hood of your car before you start it in the morning to make sure you don't have a cat or any kind of rodent that has gone up there to absorb the warmth," Wolko says.

Keep them away from toxic chemicals used to treat ice on cars. "Antifreeze is highly toxic to dogs and cats, and when you put the fluid in your car for the windshield wipers, you have to make sure there's none that they can get into or lick," Little says. "Antifreeze has a sweet aroma to it, and dogs and cats typically like the taste of it, but it is extremely deadly."



Be sure to check your car before turning it on.

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Look for sidewalk deicers that say "nontoxic for pets." Use ones that are safe for pets and people don't. "Most salts can be safe for pets to walk in as long as they aren't licking it off the paws. You will find the bags at the store can say 'pet friendly' or 'dog friendly' to show they don't have added chemicals that are harmful when ingested," Little says.

Remember that cars might not be able to stop quickly. Be careful when crossing streets with your pet, cautions Greenstein, who notes that cars may require extra stopping distance on snow and ice.

Be careful driving with pets on icy roads. Being inside a car can be just as dangerous in winter as crossing the street in front of one, says Wolko, who recommends restraining or containing your pet when they're in the car with you. "Winter weather can be unpredictable. Snow, freezing rain, sleet and black ice all create slick driving conditions," she says, adding that the best choices are travel crates and safety harnesses like those certified as safe by the Center for Pet Safety. "Extension tethers — also known as seat belts — and zip line products should be avoided... Those add-on devices increase the risk of injury for all vehicle occupants."

Try indoor sweaters and outdoor jackets. Although some breeds are more cold-tolerant than others — Alaskan malamutes and Siberian huskies were bred to withstand winter temperatures, for example — most dogs need coats and boots when they go outside. Although a light sweater is suitable indoors, Greenstein prefers coats for outdoor use because they tend to be more protective. In particular, she suggests looking for waterproof coats with tapered sleeves that cover the limbs while keeping out snow and water.



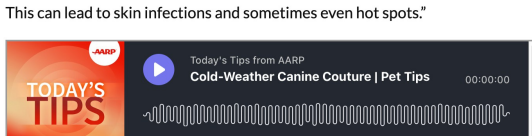
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Also pay attention to linings, says Wolko, who notes that waterproof material is better for exteriors than for interiors. "I've got some beautifully warm Thinsulate jackets, myself, but the linings are so slippery that they can be very cold for dogs," she says. "Something that's warm — potentially fleece-lined — would be good."

Watch for chaffing, Little cautions. "When putting jackets on your pets, monitor how tightly it adheres, how warm they get and where it rubs," he says. "I see a lot of dogs that will get dermatitis [caused by] these extra coats and layers... This can lead to skin infections and sometimes even hot spots."



Invest in footwear for safe winter walking. For footwear, look for warmth and waterproofing. "In freezing temperatures, wet feet on a dog can cause frostbite of the pads on the paw," Wolko says.

Foot protection is important to protect against not only cold but also the dangers of antifreeze and deicers.

If your dog resists boots, be a bucket of warm water near the door, and rinse their feet before they have a chance to go inside and lick them, Wolko suggests. Another option, Berst says, is paw wax or balm.

Be vigilant against hypothermia. To prevent hypothermia, keep pets dry when they're exposed to snow and slush — which might require extra effort even when pets wear coats and boots, notes veterinarian Laurie McCauley, owner of Red Tail Rehab, a mobile canine sports medicine and rehabilitation practice in North Carolina. "Any dog that has gotten wet will lose their body heat quickly in a cold environment, making it a potentially dangerous situation," she says, adding that smaller, thinner and older dogs are most vulnerable. "Move your pet to a warmer, drier area and dry them thoroughly with a towel."

If possible, use a hair dryer on low heat to warm and dry their body. Wrapping them in towels or blankets from the dryer, or even snuggling them against your skin to share body heat, can also be beneficial... Many dogs, given the chance, will dry themselves off if blankets or towels are placed on the ground, rubbing their nose, face and back on the towel. Be sure the armpits, inside of the legs and belly are dry as well, since they can't easily reach these areas."

Note health conditions your pet has that may be exacerbated by the cold. Winter can be especially difficult for animals with osteoarthritis. "Osteoarthritis pain can be more painful in the cold," says Berst, who suggests orthopedic beds — and perhaps medications or supplements, too. "Ask your veterinarian for ways to help your pet if they seem like they are not moving around as well in the winter months."

Although typically associated with warmer months, allergies also can be exacerbated in winter, according to Liza Cahn, a veterinarian at Embrace Pet Insurance. "Animals with certain environmental allergies can have flare-ups in the winter for several reasons, including closed windows and lack of fresh air circulation, which trap allergens in the home, more time spent indoors and the dehydrating effects of cold, dry air," explains Cahn, who says dust mites and mold spores are common allergens. "Dust mites thrive in warm, dry, indoor environments and are commonly found in bedding, carpets and upholstered furniture. Mold spores can increase indoors in damp areas like bathrooms, basements and laundry rooms. When allergies go untreated, pets may develop chronic itchy skin, skin and ear infections, hair loss and ongoing discomfort that can significantly affect their quality of life."

Air purifiers and humidifiers can help, "but if dry, itchy skin is irritating your pet, it's best to see your vet," Cahn says.

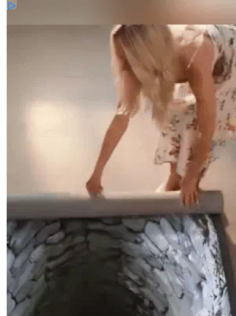
Remember that pets catch viruses too. "Some pets, like ferrets, dogs, cats and birds, can catch a virus like the flu directly from a human, so it's important to practice good hygiene always, but especially during flu season," Fredal says. "Practicing good handwashing and avoiding handling of a pet when you are ill is safe for you and the pet. Utilizing a medical mask around a pet if you are ill is recommended if you cannot avoid interaction 100 percent."

Echoes Berst, "Pets may meet their pet friends indoors in the winter months, and that could increase the spread of respiratory diseases," such as kennel cough. "Places like doggy day cares, groomers, boarding facilities and even dog parks are prime locations for transmission. It's not just limited to these places. Infections can happen anywhere dogs gather, from sharing water bowls or toys to simply greeting another dog on a walk. Most infected dogs are contagious before they even show symptoms, which can lead to rapid spread and make the disease challenging to control. The good news is that the most effective preventive measure is vaccination, and there are different types of vaccines available, including nasal or oral vaccines."

Keep an eye on their weight. Just like it is in humans, obesity in pets is a chronic condition that can lead to all sorts of maladies — and it can be a bigger problem in winter, Greenstein cautions. "When they live in cold climates, most pets are more confined to the indoors and more sedentary during the winter. Don't forget to adjust their caloric intake to account for their decrease in activity level," she says. "On the flip side, if you have an Arctic-breed dog who loves to frolic in the snow, make sure their food intake keeps up with their energy demands."

No matter the season, accidents happen. Still, being cautious pays dividends. "These creatures are fully dependent on us, and we, as pet owners, are responsible for them," Wolko says. "These are not fun things for pets to go through — and from a pet owner perspective, they are expensive vet visits."

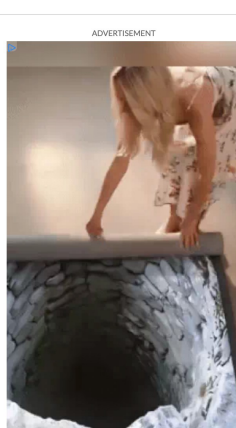
Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.



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