

Ask A Vet: The Heat Is On

Sunday, June 19, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

With the increased outdoor temperatures that we have been having recently, are there any extra considerations that we should have when taking our dog outside for walks, hikes, playing, etc?

-Worried about the Heat

Dear Worried,

That is an excellent question for the summer. If not obvious, dogs are covered in fur. Depending on the breed, the amount and thickness of the fur heat can be trapped, causing the dog to become too hot. Dogs also have a very limited ability to sweat or otherwise lose body heat. They can sweat a small amount through their foot pads, but the main way of expelling heat is through panting. Heat and water can evaporate from their tongues and the warm air in their lungs can be expelled. Panting is relatively inefficient heat removal system, especially if it is humid outside.

Factors including the age, breed, and physical fitness level of your dog can determine their ability to be out in warm weather. Older dogs can have more body fat which can act as an insulation layer, causing them to retain more heat. Breed is one of the largest factors influencing a dog's ability to be in the heat. Brachycephalic dogs (short snouted dogs like bulldogs, pugs, Boston terriers, etc) often have extra tissue in the back of their throats which can expand when the dog gets hot. This can compress the airway leading to decreased panting ability and cooling. Finally, fitness level must be accounted for. If your dog exercises on a regular basis, they may be better suited to spending time outside. Dogs that spend more time inside on the couch are probably not prepared to run a 5K in 90 degree temperatures. Physical fitness in dogs is achieved the same way that you develop conditioning. Develop an exercise program for yourself and your dog to prepare for any extended time out during the summer.

Overheating in dogs can become heatstroke. If you plan on spending a lot of time outside with your dog, it is good practice to carry a rectal thermometer and be comfortable checking your dog's temperature. A normal dog's rectal temperature is 99.5 to 102.5 F. Overheating is 102.5-104 F. Heatstroke can be seen at 104 degrees and bad cases can be up to 109-110 F. With simple overheating, move the dog to a cool area, and provide cool water to drink to lower the dog's temperature. With heatstroke you must cool your dog's body and get them to your veterinarian as fast as possible. If possible, spray your dog with tepid water (not ice water!), put ice packs in their armpits, and put them in the car with the A/C full blast and windows down. If it is a longer trip to a veterinarian office, continue checking the temperature every 15 minutes and stop actively cooling them when their temperature reaches 103 degrees. Once at your veterinarian, many treatments will be performed to help stabilize your dog and hopefully prevent significant organ and brain damage. As always, consult your veterinarian for further information and help with developing an exercise plan for your dog.

Dr. Jason Heitzman