

# Ask A Vet: Keeping Pets Safe in Winter Weather

*Sunday, November 10, 2013*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

This is our first winter in a cold climate and I am concerned about our pets. Can you give me some tips for the winter?

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Indiana. The cold and snow of winter can be hard on everyone, including pets. Here are a few tips to keep your furry friends safe and warm when the temperatures drop.

Don't assume a fur coat will keep your pet warm. Keep pets inside as much as possible to prevent frostbite and hypothermia. Although some thick coated dogs can tolerate the cold better, in general, if you are uncomfortable outside your pet is too.

If pets must stay outside, provide shelter that is dry and free from drafts. For outdoor dogs, an insulated doghouse no more than 3 times larger than your dog is a must. Orient the door away from the wind and elevate the doghouse several inches off the ground. Straw or cedar bedding and a thick flap over the opening will help retain body heat. Similar shelter or access to indoors should be provided for cats that go outside. If the temperature/wind chill is below 0 degrees, bring your pet into a heated building.

For outdoor pets, make sure water is available and not frozen. Heated bowls can be found at most pet and feed stores. Your dog needs about 15% more calories in cold weather if he lives outside, but many indoor dogs are less active in winter and need less food – keep an eye on your pet's weight.

De-icers and salt can irritate skin on paws, so be sure to wipe feet off after a walk or use booties to protect feet from chemicals and cold. Also check for uncomfortable snow/ice balls between toes if outside for longer periods. And always be aware of the dangers of antifreeze – a very small amount can kill your pet. Don't allow your pet to eat/lick snow or ice from roads or sidewalks.

Pets with chronic illnesses, very young pets and older pets are more sensitive to winter weather. Arthritic pets may have a harder time as colder weather can stiffen joints and ice makes getting around even harder. Give an arthritic pet a soft place to lie down. Be prepared to give extra support on steps and hills when going on walks.

If you have cats that go outside, always check under the hood of your vehicle before starting it. Cats like to go where it is warm and have been known to climb into engine compartments and get caught in the belts of the engine.

Animals can get lost easily in snowstorms. The wind and snow cover tracks and scent and your pet may

not be able to find his way home. Always make sure your pet is securely enclosed or walked on a leash. Never let him out unattended in a storm.

Hope these tips help. Stay safe and warm this winter.

-Dr. Teresa Alessandri