

Protect Your Pet During Winter and Cold Weather

Humane Society of the United States

Follow our tips to keep cats, dogs and horses safe and comfortable

In many areas, winter is a season of bitter cold and numbing wetness. Extra precautions during winter months will make sure your four-footed family members stay safe and warm.

Help your pets remain happy and healthy during the colder months by following these simple guidelines:

Keep pets indoors and warm

Don't leave dogs or cats outdoors when the temperature drops. Regardless of the season, short-haired, very young or old dogs and all cats should never be left outside without supervision. Dogs and cats are safer indoors, except when taken out for exercise. During walks, short-haired dogs may feel more comfortable wearing a sweater.

No matter what the temperature is, windchill can threaten a pet's life. Pets are sensitive to severe cold and are at risk for frostbite and hypothermia when they are outdoors during extreme cold snaps. Exposed skin on noses, ears and paw pads can quickly freeze and suffer permanent damage.

Take precautions if your dog spends a lot of time outside

A dog or cat is happiest and healthiest when kept indoors. If for some reason your dog is outdoors much of the day, he or she must be protected by a dry, draft-free shelter that is large enough to allow the dog to sit and lie down comfortably but small enough to hold in his/her body heat. The floor should be raised a few inches off the ground and covered with cedar shavings or straw. The house should be turned to face away from the wind, and the doorway should be covered with waterproof burlap or heavy plastic.

Help neighborhood outdoor cats

If there are outdoor cats, either owned pets or community cats (ferals, who are scared of people, and strays, who are lost or abandoned pets) in your area, remember that they need protection from the elements as well as food and water. It's easy to give them a hand.

Give your pets plenty of water

Pets who spend a lot of time outdoors need more food in the winter because keeping warm depletes energy. Routinely check your pet's water dish to make certain the water is fresh and unfrozen. Use plastic food and water bowls rather than metal; when the temperature is low, your pet's tongue can stick and freeze to metal.

Be careful with cats, wildlife and cars

Warm engines in parked cars attract cats and small wildlife, who may crawl up under the hood. To avoid injuring any hidden animals, bang on your car's hood to scare them away before starting your engine.

Protect paws from salt

The salt and other chemicals used to melt snow and ice can irritate the pads of your pet's feet. Wipe all paws with a damp towel before your pet licks them and irritates his/her mouth.

Avoid antifreeze poisoning

Antifreeze is a deadly poison, but it has a sweet taste that may attract animals and children. Wipe up spills and store antifreeze (and all household chemicals) out of reach. Coolants and antifreeze made with propylene glycol are less toxic to pets, wildlife and family.

Speak out if you see a pet left in the cold

If you encounter a pet left in the cold, document what you see: the date, time, exact location and type of animal, plus as many details as possible about the situation. Video and photographic documentation (even a cell phone photo) will help bolster your case. Then contact your local animal control agency or county sheriff's office and present your evidence. Take detailed notes regarding whom you speak with and when. Respectfully follow up in a few days if the situation has not been remedied.

The best tip of all: keep your pets with you

Probably the best prescription for winter's woes is to keep your dog or cat inside with you and your family. The happiest dogs are those who are taken out frequently for walks and exercise but kept inside the rest of the time.

Dogs and cats are social animals who crave human companionship. Your animal companions deserve to live indoors with you and your family.

Horse owners: provide special care to your outdoor pets

Give your horses shelter and dry warmth

Be sure your horses have access to a barn or a three-sided run-in so they can escape the wind and cold.

While not all horses will need to be blanketed, blankets will help horses keep warm and dry, especially if there is any rain or snow. If you've body-clipped your horses, keep them blanketed throughout the winter.

Supply food and water to your horses around the clock

Give your horses access to unfrozen water at all times. You can use heated buckets or water heaters/deicers to make sure the water doesn't freeze.

Feed your horses more forage—unlimited amounts, if possible—during extreme cold. This will help your horses create heat and regulate their body temperatures.