

Heat Related Illnesses in Dogs & Cats

Overview

As temperatures rise, it is important to keep in mind the safety of our furry friends. Heat related illness is more common in animals. Most animals do not sweat over their full bodies like humans do. Their body is instead covered with a dense layer of fur. This means that they are incapable of releasing heat quickly enough to stay cool when faced with extreme heat conditions. A dog or cat's sole way of reducing body heat is through panting and the pads of their feet. This is not very efficient.

Heat exhaustion and heat stroke are the two most common forms of heat related illness. Heat exhaustion is the first step and easily reversible without lasting damage to the pet. Heat stroke is more severe and can leave permanent brain or nerve damage or could even be fatal.

Symptoms of Heat Exhaustion & Heat Stroke

Heat exhaustion begins as intense panting. The tongue will take on a wide flat shape and be lolling out of the animals' mouth (appearing much larger than normal). The animal may be reluctant to rise and could even begin to seem a bit disoriented or dizzy. Their body temperature may rise to 105-107 degrees and begin to affect their thought processes. Vomiting can occur as can fainting or brief moments of unconsciousness.

Heat stroke is the next stage of heat illness. You may have seen the symptoms listed above but not known what they were (or you may have missed them entirely). At the stage of heat stroke, your pet's life is in danger. Diarrhoea and vomiting are common. You may no longer see the pet panting but their gums and tongue may be dry and very red. They may or may not be conscious but they certainly won't be acting like themselves. Seizures can occur at this stage and are a clear indication that damage has already begun in the brain. The animal's temperature can reach up to 109 or 110 degrees.

Taking Action When Symptoms Occur



If you see signs of heat stroke in your pet, seek veterinary care IMMEDIATELY! Begin cooling on the drive (turn on air-conditioning if you have it) but do not waste time to accomplish it. Immediate fluid therapy and cooling is necessary to save their life.

If you see the above signs of heat exhaustion in your pet, take these steps urgently:

1. Immediately get them somewhere cool and physically stop their activity! Dogs may get so excited about being in a new place or doing something new that they do not realize they have overdone it until it is too late.
2. Shade (or ideally air conditioning) is imperative to reversing the rising temperature. Get the animal wet (especially around the throat and belly). Running water is best as still water (bathtub or pond) does not always circulate new, cool water around the animal's body.

3. Let them drink water.
4. Monitor their body temperature (with a thermometer if possible). Once the temp is down to 103, stop the cooling process! It is possible to overcool the animal and give them hypothermia if you cool their temp back to normal.
5. Take your pet to a vet even if they seem to have recovered. Low levels of dehydration may still be present. Even small levels of heat exhaustion or stroke can cause kidney damage without proper hydration.

Preventing Heat Related Illnesses

Prevention is more important than treatment!

1. Never leave your animal under direct sunlight without access to shade or plentiful water. They need the ability to escape the sun's harsh rays just as we do.
2. Never leave your animal a water bucket they can spill as their only source of drinking water. Hot animals will search for a means to cool off. If they can spill or dig in their water bowl, they will as it refreshes them. This can lead to a potentially deadly situation with your pet having no water while being out in the heat.
3. Never leave your animal in a parked car, even with the windows cracked. University studies on parked cars consistently found that the car's temperature was, on average, 12-20 degrees HOTTER than the outside temperature. This means that even external temperatures in the low 80's are hot enough to reach the high 90's or even over 100 degrees. That's plenty hot enough to begin the road to heat stroke. Temperatures begin climbing the moment you shut the driver's door. The temperature skyrockets in the first 5 minutes. In one study the temp jumped from 62 to 86 degrees in the 5 minutes and within 15 minutes, the interior temperature was at 107. Cracking the windows or parking in the shade does not slow that process very much. Another important fact noted in this study is that animals left in the bed of a pickup or on the bed of a service truck are in no less danger. Even though ambient temperatures maybe lower, the animal is often in direct sunlight or in direct contact with metals that can reach up to 131 degrees!
4. When taking your dog with you to places like the beach, hiking, or the park, take plenty of water, rest often and find shade. Make sure to monitor your dog's exercise level. If you begin to feel overly warm, they will too.
5. Watch hot concrete & sand! Hot concrete, asphalt and sand can not only radiate more heat back up at the animal but also burn sensitive footpads and bellies. Care should be taken if walking on hot surfaces to provide adequate foot cover or rather have your pet walk on grass instead.

