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#### Cold-Weather Tips



We endured another long, hot summer not too long ago, during which I’m sure you heard all the reminders about the dangers to our dogs that come with toasty temps. But did you know there are hazards that lurk in the winter season as well?

Sometimes we think that because most of our dogs have nice furry coats, that they’ll do just fine in the cold…but that’s not always true. Coats come in all types, from double-coated to single-coated and everything in between. For instance, there’s the smooth coat (think about boxers, bulldogs, Chihuahuas, Dobermans, and Boston terriers), the short coat (on dogs like the Labrador retriever, beagle, and Rottweiler), the combination coat (which you find on golden retrievers and border collies), and a multitude of others.

While dogs with long, thick, or double coats are generally cold-tolerant, short-haired dogs become colder faster because they have less protection…so as silly as some people think it looks, putting a sweater or jacket on your short- or smooth-coated dog isn’t a bad idea at all when the weather turns truly frightful and he’s forced to be outdoors.

At the same time, short-legged dogs like dachshunds will become cold faster because their bellies and bodies are closer to wet or snow-covered ground. (Remember too that most dogs’ bellies have shorter and less dense fur than they carry elsewhere, so those areas can be especially susceptible to extreme cold.) Even breeds like huskies that are accustomed to glacial climates, can develop frostbite and hypothermia if they’re exposed to below-freezing temperatures for long periods of time.

You also need to get a feel for your own dog’s cold-tolerance. My neighbors, for instance, have a strapping, beefy-looking pit bull mix who starts to shiver once the temperature falls much below 55 degrees…so clearly, he’s not terribly thrilled when his family wants to go outside to romp in the snow. My double-coated Joey, on the other hand, could probably hike through slush and snowbanks for hours and never blink an eye.

Speaking of snow, be careful about those “ice-balls” that form between your dog’s toes when she’s been out in the snow: they can be extremely painful for your dog to walk on, and can contribute to frostbite. Some people put waterproof boots on their dog for treks through snow or on wet and muddy trails. And if you walk near roads that are treated with de-icers, be sure to clean your dog’s paws as soon as you get home: some ice treatment products contain highly toxic chemicals that your dog could ingest if he licks his paws. (Today, there are more and more nontoxic de-icers on the market, so if you need to treat your own driveway, look for ones labeled as pet-friendly.)

It hopefully goes without saying that if your dog is very young or very old, frail, or has serious health problems, you need to keep him indoors. Just like humans, older dogs, those with health conditions, and small puppies simply can’t regulate their body temperatures or tolerate temperature extremes well.

We’re all pretty well conditioned these days to keep our dogs out of hot cars in the summer…but a car can also act like a refrigerator in sub-freezing temps, so it’s best to leave your pooch home if you have to be gone when the thermometer drops below 30 or 32 degrees.

I’m not a big believer in leaving a dog outdoors, but if this is your practice, please make sure she’s protected from the cold and wet. She needs to have a shelter that’s large enough for her to lie down comfortably, yet small enough to hold in her body heat. The floor should be raised a few inches off the ground and covered with cedar shavings, straw, or a thick blanket, and the doorway should be covered with waterproof burlap or heavy plastic.

Ideally, though, you’ll give your companion a place to sleep inside the house where she can be safe, warm, comfortable, and be exactly what she is: a member of the family.

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