

Keep Your Pets Cool During the Dog Days of Summer

The “dog days of summer” is a phrase used to describe the hot and humid days of summer. It can be traced back thousands of years to the days of the Roman Empire. It refers to the dates from July 03 through August 11, which is 20 days prior and 20 days after the star Sirius rises and falls in conjunction with the sun. Sirius was known as the “Dog Star”, because it is the brightest star in the constellation Canis Major (Large Dog).

The dangerous heat and humidity of these "dog days" can be harmful to not only humans, but human's best friend and other animals as well. Pets are considered family to many people, and in the event of an emergency, sometimes people will not evacuate if their pets have to be left behind. To gather information on how to protect your pets this summer, the National Weather Service reached out to Donnie Embrey, the Team Leader for Louisa Virginia Community Animal Response Team. Donnie and his team are part of a non-profit organization dedicated to emergency preparedness, response and management specifically focused on preparedness and response for pets and their owners. Here are a few things to keep in mind during the "dog days" this summer to help keep your pets safe."

Pets, just like humans, are susceptible to heat illness - make sure to keep your animals hydrated! For dogs, Donnie says “A good general guideline is that a healthy dog should drink between ½ and 1 ounce of water per pound of body weight each day under normal conditions. Of course, any pet will need more water on hot and humid days and your pet’s age, hair type, level of activity, medical history and any prior history of a prior heat related illness may dictate that your pet needs more water than the average dog.” When it comes to diet, Donnie says “reducing a pet’s food intake on warmer days can help the pet cope with the heat, especially reducing the intake of grain based foods that cause a metabolic spike in body temperature.” A common misconception is that giving your pet a buzz cut in the summer is a good idea, but that may not be best for your pet. “A pet’s coat acts as insulation, it keeps it warm in the winter and cool in the summer by blocking the heat of the sun from reaching the skin.” For example, “the several layers of the dog’s coat keep the heat out and air circulating. If you remove the natural cooling process the dog will have a harder time coping with the heat.” Check with a veterinarian or professional groomer to find out what’s best for your pet.

Hot asphalt or cement can easily burn an animal's paws, so try to minimize walking your pet during the hottest part of the day. Not sure how hot the asphalt is? Place the back of your hand on the asphalt - if it's too hot for you, it's too hot for them. Also, as mentioned before, animals can suffer from heat illness. A few signs of heat illness in pets are rapid or irregular heart rate, excessive drooling, lethargy, refusal to eat, or excessive panting. “Panting is a normal cooling mechanism for a dog”, says Donnie, “but a very bad sign for a cat. Be aware of excessive panting in dogs.” If you notice any of these signs of heat illness “remove your pet from the heated environment and get it into a cooler environment. Apply cool towels to the pet, remove the towels, wring out the warm water, re-wet and reapply. Provide plenty of cool fresh water for the pet, but be careful not to chill the pet.”

Last but not least, NEVER leave a pet unattended inside a vehicle. The temperature inside a vehicle can rise very quickly and is just as dangerous for pets as it is for people. Rolling down the windows is not a safe alternative. Keep these things in mind and have a safe and fun-filled dog days of summer.

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Questions...

Question 1:

Are animals affected by heat as well or are they more resilient?

Yes, warmer temperatures affect pets just like humans are.

Also, pets can become climatized or become used to the heat like a human and can handle the warmer temperatures better as they are slowly exposed to the heat.

Also like humans a pet not used to the heat can be expected to have a lesser coping mechanism to the warmer temperatures.

2. What are some warning signs that pets exhibit when they are suffering from heat illness?

Excessive panting – panting is a normal cooling mechanism for a dog but a very bad sign for a cat, be aware of excessive panting or drooling by dogs.

Other signs:

- Increased body temperature - above 103° F (39° C)
- Reddened gums and moist tissues of the body
- Production of only small amounts of urine or no urine
- Rapid heart rate
- Irregular heart beats
- The tenting of the skin on the back of the neck when the skin is pinched and raised up.
- Lethargy
- Refusal to eat.

3. What can people do to help if they notice a pet with heat illness?

Remove the pet from the heated environment and get it into a cooler environment.

Apply cool towels to the pet, remove the towels, wring out the warm water, re-wet and reapply.

Provide plenty of cool fresh water for the pet.

Be careful not to chill the pet (body temperature below 100 degrees).

4. We talk about drinking plenty of water. What is the best way to ensure our pets are getting plenty of fluids?

A good general guideline is that a healthy dog should drink between ½ and 1 ounce of water per pound of body weight each day under normal conditions. Of course, any pet will need more water on hot and humid days and your pet's age, hair type, level of activity, medical history and any prior history of a prior heat related illness may dictate that your pet needs more water than the average dog. Make sure your pet receives plenty of water a day by being aware of your pet's surroundings and history.

5. Can we change our pet's diet in any way to help them handle the heat?

Reducing a pet's food intake on warmer days can help the pet cope with the heat, especially reducing the intake of grain based foods that cause a metabolic spike in body temperature.

6. Does it help to cut their fur?

A pet's coat acts as insulation, it keeps it warm in the winter and cool in the summer by blocking the heat of the sun from reaching the skin. The several layers of the dog's coat keep the heat out and air circulating. If you remove the natural cooling process the dog will have a harder time coping with the heat. It is best to allow a professional groomer to give your long-haired pet a "summer cut", they will know the safe amount of hair to remove. Remember, pets shed. They naturally reduce their hair for the warmer weather, you can help them by regularly brushing them and helping to remove the excess hair.

7. Do you have any advice on pet safety in vehicles?

Yes, do not ever leave a pet in a vehicle!! The temperature in a vehicle can raise to dangerous levels very quickly. I love the picture that circulates around social media in the summertime that shows a person in obvious distress locked up in a car with the window lowered about 2 inches, the dog is standing outside telling the police officer that he left the window cracked.

It's simple. If you cannot tolerate being locked up in a hot car, what in your right mind makes you think your pet can?

8. Is there anything else I'd like to share?

The heat of the summer is not the only danger a pet can encounter.

Other dangers include:

- Heartworms - The heartworm or dog heartworm, is a parasitic roundworm that is spread from host to host through the bites of mosquitoes. Administer heartworm preventives and keep non-animal water containers emptied.
- Pool safety - Not all dogs are good swimmers. Introduce your pets to water gradually. Rinse your dog off after swimming to remove chlorine or salt from his fur, and try to keep your dog from drinking pool water, which contains chlorine and other chemicals.
- Hot Asphalt - Be aware of the effects of hot asphalt on your pet. Your pet's body may be closer to the ground than you are, your dog's body temperature can rise quickly, and sensitive paw pads can burn. Keep walks during these times to a minimum.
- Chemicals - We use more chemicals in the summertime, things like insecticides, herbicides and rotocides. Be aware of the effects of the chemicals and where you apply them.
- Thunderstorms - Thunderstorms increase in the summertime and can be very frightening to a pet, many animals are lost during thunderstorms. Think about kenneling your dog during a storm or purchasing a thunder shirt.
- The Fourth of July - The Fourth of July fireworks are a fun time for humans but a frightening time for pets. The noise and the flashes of light can cause a pet to become spooked and run off. More pets are reported lost on the 5th of July than any other day of the year and encounters with wild animals increase too.

Please leave your pet at home, inside and leave on a stereo or TV to help with the noise.