

Don't let heatstroke kill your pet

It is always nice to have to some warm sunny weather in the UK, but don't forget the sun carries its own problems for your pets.

For many years, animal charities have advertised widely of the dangers of leaving dogs in locked cars in the sun, and increasing awareness of this risk has helped to minimise the traumatic death of many pets.

However, there are many other factors which can increase a pet's risk of heatstroke, and many ways in which you can make sure your pet is safe.

How do dogs control their temperature?

Dogs have no sweat glands (except for on the pads of the feet), and so cannot sweat in warm weather to cool down. Instead, they pant. This is a special type of breathing, where shallow, rapid breaths carry air over the tongue. The tongue becomes engorged with large blood vessels which are cooled by the passage of air.

Panting relies on the evaporation of moisture from the surface of the tongue, and so it is much less effective in humid weather.

A panting dog in a small space (for example a car) will rapidly cause the air to become damp and steamy. Evaporation from the tongue is much reduced, and the dog can no longer lose heat. The body temperature can rapidly rise to fatal levels.



What other risk factors are there?

- **Short-nosed (Brachycephalic) dogs** such as Bulldogs, Pugs, Boston terriers, some Shih-Tzus and Pekingese have narrow airways due to their face shape. It takes them a larger amount of effort just to breathe at normal temperatures than long-nosed dogs, so during hot weather they are placing large demands on their respiratory tract. They can find it difficult to cool down in hot weather.
- **Obesity.** An overweight pet is covered in a layer of insulating fat, and is also rounder in shape, which makes it more difficult to lose heat. An obese dog also has to work harder to exercise and so may get hotter more quickly if exercised in hot weather.

- **Heart or lung disease.** Any pet with problems that affect the breathing or circulation will be more susceptible to heatstroke if they cannot cool down efficiently.
- **Energetic exercise.** Muscular exertion generates quite a lot of heat and a very active dog can raise their body temperature by two or three degrees even in cool weather.
- **Dehydration.** As heat loss depends on the body losing moisture from the tongue, a dehydrated dog with a dry tongue will not be able to do this. Further loss of moisture by panting may lead to collapse and shock.

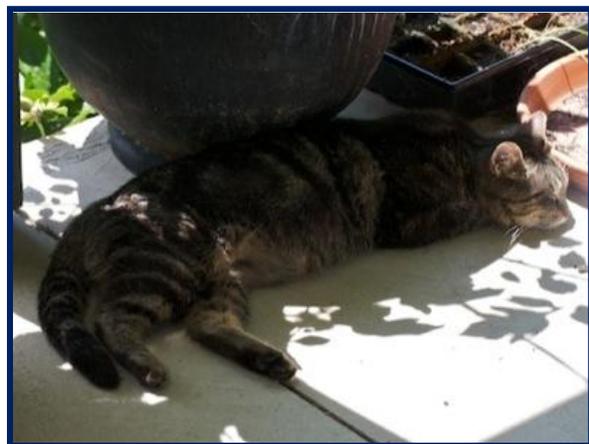
What can I do to protect my pet?

Dogs

- Avoid strenuous exercise during the hottest part of the day. Walk your dog early in the morning, or in the evening when it is cooler.
- Encourage your dog to drink from streams or ponds, and let them paddle and get wet if they want- it all helps to keep them cool.
- Take a bottle of water and a bowl with you if you don't have access to streams or ponds. If your dog appears very hot, wet the skin on the belly or dampen the coat with water.
- Make sure dogs left alone have fresh water to drink.
- Do not leave dogs in cars or vans, unless you have a secure grille that means the boot can be left wide open. (Just leaving a window or the sunroof open is not usually sufficient)
- Ensure any illness of the heart or lungs is treated by your vet, and as well controlled as possible.
- If your dog is overweight, ask your vet about weight loss! Getting your dog slim has many health benefits.

Cats

- Cats are more sensible than dogs, and tend to rest more in hot weather and seek out cooler places to lie.
- Make sure your cat has access to fresh water at all times.
- Make sure your cat always has access to a shady area, e.g. under trees or bushes, or indoors.



- Keep long coats well groomed to remove excess undercoat and prevent tangles. This will increase the circulation of air to the skin.
- Cats are more at risk from sunburn as they tend to sit on the windowsill in the sun. Areas with thin hair such as ear tips and the bridge of the nose are most often affected, especially if the hair is white in these areas. Sunblock cream can be used. A pet-safe formulation called PetScreen can be obtained from your vets.

Small pets

- Keep rabbit hutches and outdoor runs out of direct sunlight in the middle of the day. Ensure air can flow freely around any pet cages or hutches during warm weather.
- Do not position bird cages in windows where they catch full sun.
- Make sure small pets always have access to plenty of fresh water. Cage birds and some other small pets appreciate access to a shallow dish of water for bathing.



How do I recognise heatstroke?

Your pet may appear weak or unable to stand, will be panting or breathing rapidly, and will feel hot to the touch, especially the feet and ears. Their tongue and gums may appear redder than normal.

In severe cases, animals may become comatose or have seizures. The body temperature only needs to rise by about 6°C to cause irreversible brain damage and death.

If you suspect heatstroke, contact your vet immediately. Try to cool your pet gradually by wetting the skin and coat with tepid water. You can also use damp towels. Do not use ice or very cold water – the wetting action is usually sufficient and you want to avoid shocking the circulation. Move the pet out of the sun and lie them on a cool, clean surface.

With common sense, it is easy to avoid heatstroke and still enjoy the warm, sunny weather while you can!

Article written by
Bernice Fitzmaurice MRCVS
Veterinary Surgeon, Riverside Veterinary Care