

## Winter Woes for Felines: Keeping Your Cat Warm and Safe

Delve into the world of feline comfort during chilly months, uncover tips to safeguard outdoor cats and explore DIY solutions to create cozy shelters for homeless feline friends.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Cold weather is upon us; are you ensuring your feline family member is staying warm, cozy, and healthy?
- Cats don't do well in cold weather and should never be left outdoors; while their individual tolerance for cold varies, virtually all kitties run the risk of hypothermia and frostbite in temperatures below 32°F
- Cats feel most comfortable when their environment is 86°F to 97°F that's why they find creative ways to conserve body heat in human-friendly indoor temps of 66°F to 77°F
- Community cats need our help in cold weather in the form of secure winter shelters, straw bedding, and extra calories and dietary fat

Cats, being enigmatic little creatures, are skilled at keeping their humans guessing. About everything. And one of those things is whether their environment is at a comfortable temperature for them.

Since it's winter right now in most parts of the world, you may be wondering if your feline family member is feeling chilly. She's showing no signs one way or the other, of course, so you're left to sort it out on your own.

The fact is cats get cold quite easily. Your kitty descended from desert dwellers, after all, and his body temperature is warmer than yours. This means he feels chilled at temperatures that are quite comfortable for you and other human family members. It's why you find him seeking out sunny spots around your house and spending more time on your lap during the colder months of the year.

As you might expect, both seniors and kittens get cold quicker than healthy adults, as do cats who are sick, underweight, or from a warm climate. Super fluffy breeds and breed mixes like the Maine Coon will stay warm a bit longer, but ultimately, all cats grow uncomfortable in chilly temps.

### Outdoors in Cold Weather Is No Place for Felines

If your cat is outdoors (hopefully either on a walk with you, or in a safe, enclosed catio, and not free roaming the neighborhood or left in a parked car) and feels cold, she'll first find the warmest spot available and tuck in. As she gets colder, she'll curl up in a tight ball, and may cover her nose with her tail. Next, she'll start to shiver and curl into an even tighter ball.

If she isn't brought into a warm environment sooner rather than later, her body temperature will drop below 100°F and she'll become hypothermic, quiet, and unresponsive. I don't need to go into what happens next, or why it's so important to make sure your kitty stays toasty warm and safe from the elements.

## Temperature Check

Tolerable temperatures vary by cat, however, in general terms:<sup>1</sup>

- If your cat is small, has a thin coat, is a senior or a kitten, he shouldn't be subjected to environments in which the temp is below 50°F
- Kitties who've lost a significant amount of body weight or have a disease like arthritis can feel chilled when the temperature dips below 60°F
- Most healthy adult cats will grow uncomfortable after a prolonged period of time in an environment below 45°F
- Black cats absorb more heat from the sun than kitties with lighter coats
- Outdoor (e.g., feral, community, farm) cats may grow thicker coats that provide better insulation
- Certain larger, thicker-coated breeds (e.g., Norwegian Forest Cats) may have a natural ability to better tolerate colder temps
- Virtually all cats run the risk of hypothermia and frostbite in temperatures below 32°F

## Cats Like It Hot

During the winter months, many cat parents report finding their pets lounging in a bathroom sink, curled up in a shoe in the closet, or perched in a box, shopping bag or laundry basket. That's because kitties feel most comfortable when their environment is 86°F to 97°F. In this temperature range, they don't need to expend metabolic energy trying to either warm up or cool down.

Since most of us set our home thermostats in the range of 66°F to 77°F to suit the humans in the household, our feline family members naturally find ways to warm up their immediate environment. Cardboard boxes and similar items provide insulation, and small spaces require your cat to curl up, which preserves body heat.

Your kitty will also seek out spots in the warmest areas of your home, such as near heating vents, a fireplace, a sunny spot on furniture or the floor, or your lap. However, there may be times when she needs some extra TLC to feel warm, in which case a heated cat bed, blanket, or even a sweater if she'll tolerate it can make a big difference in her comfort level.

## Caring for Homeless Cats in Cold Weather

If your community already cares for feral cats, or if you'd like to start a program in your neighborhood, there are ways you can help homeless cats sustain themselves during the winter months.

A winter shelter for free-roaming cats doesn't have to be elaborate — it just needs to be a place that is safe from extreme weather, and big enough for the kitties to stand and move around in. The cats will naturally snuggle up together in their shelter to keep warm.

The structure should be placed in a spot where the cats naturally gather, or in a safe, concealed location where they will feel hidden from predators, while also able to keep an eye on their surroundings.

If you're handy, you can create a homemade shelter out of nearly any material, even a good-sized, heavy-duty cardboard box that you anchor to any available structure. The space should be large enough to accommodate several cats, but small enough to retain the cats' body heat when they gather inside.

The entry into the shelter should be just large enough for a cat to fit through. This will keep the elements outside and the inside will stay dry. Protect the entry with a makeshift awning or curtain using plastic sheeting or heavy-duty trash bags. Facing the entry to a wall or other fixed structure is another way to help keep the inside of the shelter protected from wind, rain, and snow.

You can also add insulation to the interior roof and walls of the shelter and caulk the seams to make it less drafty. It's also a good idea, if possible, to elevate the shelter so it's not in contact with ground moisture. The goal is to make the shelter snug, but also ventilated, so you'll want to put some small holes along the bottom of the structure.

For bedding, use straw rather than cloth bedding or blankets. Straw doesn't hold excess moisture, and it also helps to retain heat. For more ideas for creating a feral cat shelter, [look here](#) at pre-built shelters, as well as easy, moderate, and advanced do-it-yourself enclosures.

Outdoor cats need extra calories and dietary fat during cold weather. A canned cat food is ideal, but not if it's likely to freeze. An alternative is a dry kitten formula that is higher in calories than adult kibble.

Food and water stations should be sheltered from the cold and located as close to the sleeping shelter as possible, so the kitties don't have to travel far to get nourishment. If the shelter is close to an outdoor outlet, using a heated water bowl will prevent water from freezing overnight, when many homeless cats utilize these shelters.

Putting food and fresh water out at the same time each day will provide the cats with a schedule they can depend on, which will hopefully prevent them from wandering off into the weather in search of food.

If you can put together a little cooperative of willing neighbors to take turns feeding and watering the cats at the specified time, it can take some of the burden off you. If they can also help with the purchase of cat food, even better.

For more information on helping feral cats where you live, [Neighborhood Cats](#) and [Alley Cat Allies](#) are wonderful resources.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [PetMD, October 25, 2023](#)

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