

Cold Weather Secrets Every Pet Parent Should Know

Winter is a wonderful time to bond with your pet, but precautions need to be taken, both indoors and outdoors, to protect their health.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Keep your pets indoors during cold weather and never leave them in parked cars, as freezing temperatures can cause hypothermia, frostbite, and other life-threatening conditions
- Protect paws from salt, ice, and chemical de-icers by using booties or paw balm, and always wipe down pets after winter walks to remove toxic residue
- Store antifreeze and chemicals safely, as they are deadly to pets. Use pet-safe ice melts and watch for signs of poisoning like vomiting, tremors, or seizures
- Check under car hoods before starting your engine, since cats and small animals often seek warmth there. A quick honk or hood bang can prevent tragic accidents
- Provide warm, draft-free sleeping areas and watch for signs of hypothermia like shivering, weakness, or sluggishness. Contact your veterinarian immediately if symptoms appear

Winter is a favorite time for many people. Soft snowfalls, warm nights by the fireplace, crisp walks under pale skies, and anywhere in between, all evoke a sense of coziness that is not matched by other seasons of the year.

However, behind the coziness lurks dangers for your pet — freezing temperatures, icy sidewalks, and chemical-laden snow can all threaten their health, as well as yours. As a pet parent, it is up to you to make sure your furry family members stay warm, comfortable, and safe all season long. Here are valuable tips to make sure you have all your bases covered for an enjoyable winter.

Formulate an Emergency Plan for Your Pets

It is important to have an evacuation plan in place should the weather become too intense. Winter storms can cause power outages, road closures, and extreme cold that lasts for days. The American Red Cross advises preparing an emergency kit that includes supplies for your pets. Essentials include food, water, medications, leashes, and copies of vaccination records.¹

Keep enough items for at least five days, and make sure your kit includes familiar comfort items, like your pet's favorite toy or blanket, to help them feel secure if you need to relocate.

If you need to evacuate your home, never leave your pets behind. Most shelters and hotels will accommodate animals in emergencies, but it is smart to check local options before winter hits.

If It Is Too Cold for You, It Is Also Too Cold for Your Pet

You would not spend the night outside in freezing weather, and neither should your pet. Dogs and cats should be kept indoors during cold spells — even breeds that love the snow, like Huskies or Malamutes, can suffer from frostbite or hypothermia if left outside too long.²

If your pet needs to go outside for a time, make sure they have a warm, dry shelter. According to the Humane World for Animals, the shelter should be large enough for your dog to move comfortably, but small enough to hold in body heat. Raise the floor a few inches off the ground and cover it with straw or aspen shavings to stay dry.

Hang heavy plastic or waterproof burlap over the doorway to block the wind.³ You can even consider a pet safe radiant infrared heater for your pet's outdoor shelter; check the safety features to be sure this is a good fit for your pet's space.

Finally, never leave your pet in a parked car during the winter. A car can act like a refrigerator, trapping the cold and quickly dropping to dangerous temperatures. If you brought your pet along for a ride, double check the interior once you get home.⁴

Bundle Up for Winter Walks

Even the toughest dogs feel the chill when the winter wind blows, or the snow starts to fall. Short-haired, small, or older dogs are especially sensitive to cold. A warm sweater or coat can make a big difference, keeping your pet cozy and comfortable during walks.⁵

For extra protection, consider putting booties on your pet. These pet friendly shoes shield paws from salt, ice, and chemical de-icers that can irritate skin or cause burns. If your pet will not wear booties, apply a paw balm or petroleum jelly before walks to create a barrier against salt and chemicals.⁶

When you come home, wipe down your pet's paws and belly with a damp towel. This removes toxic residue and keeps your pet from licking harmful substances. Pay special attention between the toes, where salt and ice can hide and cause cracking or irritation.

Be Smart About Walks and Outdoor Play

Exercise is important, but winter walks require extra care. Limit time outside during bitterly cold weather, especially for small, young, or elderly pets.

Avoid walking on frozen lakes or ponds — even if the ice looks solid, it may not support your pet's weight. Falling through the ice can be deadly. Stick to cleared, safe paths whenever possible.⁷

Beware of Hidden Winter Poisons

Wintertime brings out some silent but deadly hazards for pets — and antifreeze from vehicles tops the list. Antifreeze comes in a variety of bright colors⁸ and tastes sweet to animals, but just a few drops can be fatal. Antifreeze is rapidly absorbed after ingestion and quickly results in kidney failure, which is irreversible in the later stages. Symptoms may include incoordination, vomiting, increased thirst and urination followed by lack of urination, and seizures.

Always store antifreeze and other chemicals safely and clean up spills right away after working on your car. Choose products that contain propylene glycol instead of ethylene glycol, which is less toxic to pets. The same goes with any household chemicals you use around the house.⁹

Salt and de-icing agents can also be harmful. Dogs sometimes lick salt off their paws after a walk, leading to salt poisoning — a dangerous condition that can cause vomiting, tremors, or even seizures. Use pet-safe ice melts around your home whenever possible and keep salt containers out of reach.¹⁰

If you ever suspect your pet has eaten antifreeze or another toxic substance, call your veterinarian or the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) Animal Poison Control Center at (888) 426-4435 immediately. Quick action can save your pet's life.

Check Before You Start Your Car

On a related note, cats and small wildlife often crawl under car hoods or inside wheel wells to escape the cold. Unfortunately, this can lead to tragic accidents when the engine starts. Before you start your car on cold mornings, bang on the hood or honk the horn to scare away any hidden animals.¹¹

It is a quick habit that can save an animal's life. You might even notice tiny paw prints in the snow under your car — a telltale sign that a creature may be seeking warmth there.

Protect Paws and Skin from Winter's Bite

Cold weather does not just make your pet shiver — it can also dry out their skin. The ASPCA recommends keeping your home humidified during the winter and limiting baths to prevent dry, itchy, or flaky skin.¹²

If your dog needs a bath, use a moisturizing shampoo and make sure to dry them thoroughly before going outside. When coming indoors after walks, towel off your pet completely, especially their paws and belly. Going from cold air to a heated home repeatedly can cause irritation, so a quick rubdown helps keep skin healthy.¹³

Lastly, avoid shaving your dog down to the skin in winter. Their coat is their natural insulation. Trim long hair to prevent snow clumps and tangles but keep it long enough for warmth. Short-haired breeds may need an extra layer, like a sweater or jacket with a high collar that covers from neck to belly.¹⁴

Keep Water Flowing and Food Fresh

Pets need more energy to stay warm in the cold, which means they may need extra food in the winter — especially those who spend time outside. That said, check your pet's water bowl often.

In freezing weather, metal bowls can cause your pet's tongue to stick and even freeze. Use BPA-free plastic or glass bowls and refill them with fresh, unfrozen water throughout the day. You can also buy heated water bowls or de-icers to keep water from freezing if your pet spends time outdoors.¹⁵

For horses or other farm animals, make sure their water sources stay ice-free and that they have access to ample hay or forage. Chewing generates body heat and helps them regulate temperature during extreme cold.¹⁶

Create Safe Spaces — Warm Beds and Draft-Free Nooks

When temperatures drop, your pet’s bed becomes their refuge. Make sure they have a warm, comfortable place to sleep, away from drafts and off the cold floor. A soft blanket or pillow in their favorite spot can help trap heat and keep them cozy.¹⁷

If you care for outdoor or community cats, provide insulated shelters made from a plastic storage bin or cooler lined with straw. According to Humane World for Animals, this simple DIY option can help outdoor cats stay warm and dry through even the coldest nights.¹⁸

Recognize the Signs of Hypothermia and Frostbite

Even a short time in the cold can be dangerous if your pet’s body temperature drops too low. Watch for signs like shivering, weakness, whining, or sluggishness. Frostbite is trickier to notice. It usually affects ears, paws, and tails, and symptoms might not appear until days later.¹⁹

If you suspect frostbite or hypothermia, bring your pet inside immediately and wrap them in warm blankets. Contact your veterinarian right away for guidance.

Speak Up for Animals Left Out in the Cold

Sometimes, you might notice a neighbor’s pet left outside without proper shelter. It can be heartbreaking, but your voice can make a difference. Humane World for Animals encourages people to politely reach out to the pet’s owner — they may not realize how dangerous the cold can be.²⁰

If the situation does not improve, or if you believe the animal is being neglected, contact your local animal control services. Reporting winter neglect can save an animal’s life.²¹

Help Community Animals and Wildlife

Winter can be harsh not just for pets but for stray animals and wildlife. You can help by providing safe shelters for community cats, setting out fresh water, and keeping your property free from hazards.

Before hanging outdoor holiday lights, wait until after early December — deer can become tangled in string lights placed low to the ground. Store summer items like hammocks and swings to prevent injury to wildlife.²²

Avoid Space Heater and Fireplace Hazards

It is tempting to crank up the heat or light a fire on chilly days, but both can be risky for pets. According to the Red Cross, space heaters can cause burns or start house fires if knocked over.²³

If you absolutely need to use a heater, keep it out of reach and use protective screens around fireplaces. Pets love to nap near warmth, so make sure they cannot get too close to flames or heating elements.

Know When to Call for Help

The cold months bring challenges, but they also bring opportunities to deepen your bond with your pet. When you take the time to prepare and protect them from winter’s dangers, you show them how much they mean to you.

Conversely, even with all precautions, emergencies can still happen. Contact your veterinarian if your pet shows any unusual symptoms such as shivering, lethargy, limping, or refusal to eat. For suspected poisoning, the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center is available 24/7 at (888) 426-4435.

If you see an animal in distress outdoors, contact local authorities or animal rescue organizations immediately.

Sources and References

^{1,7,13,19,23} [American Red Cross, 10 Ways to Keep Your Pets Safe When It’s Bitter Cold Outside](#)

^{2,4,5,6,12,14,17} [ASPCA, December 3, 2025](#)

^{3,9,10,11,15,16,18,20,21,22} [Humane World for Animals, How to Keep Pets Warm in Cold Winter Weather](#)

⁸ [Auto Zone, What Does Antifreeze Color Mean?](#)
