Cold Weather Care of Small Animals
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Responsible pet owners should be aware that cold weather can threaten the comfort, safety and performance of animals. Just as you take special precautions for yourself and your children during cold snaps, you should consider the special needs of your animals, too.

Most animals will be able to get through cold weather in good shape as long as they are kept dry and are given more feed. During very cold weather, some animals may need twice their normal intake of calories just for maintenance! With an enclosed shelter, thick hair coat and/or artificial protection (such as a blanket or heat), additional feed requirements can be reduced. Animals whose wintertime nutritional needs are of particular concern include those that are older, lactating, very young, growing, have any sort of illness, and those with short hair coats. If you need to feed a great deal more food, the capacity of an animal's stomach may be reached before their nutritional needs are met. If animals are becoming physically full before they have ingested sufficient calories for maintenance during cold weather, you will have to feed a more energy-dense substance. Calories in dog or cat diets can be increased by adding fat or vegetable oil. Make all changes gradually to decrease the possibility of digestive upset. Call your veterinarian or Extension agent for help with winter ration formulation.

Water is the single most important part of any animal's diet, yet this essential element is often overlooked by caregivers, especially in the winter. Water restriction can increase the possibility of constipation as well as interfere with digestive processes and reduce lactation. Animals can not meet their daily water requirements by eating snow or licking ice. Besides, these forms of water will lower an animal's internal temperature. Make sure to provide clean, unfrozen water to your animals during cold weather. Consider using one of the commercially-available water heaters and make sure you install and use it properly to reduce the risk of fire and electrocution.
Check regularly for ice and snowballs between your animals' toes. These can build up, irritate and even lacerate tender skin. Also check pets' feet for salt or other caustic substances and wash them off to prevent injury.

Watch carefully for signs of frostbite in your animals. Body parts most at risk include ear tips, tails, scrotums, toes, and teats. Frostbite can usually be avoided if animals are kept dry. It is of particular concern to animals that are born during cold weather; these newborns must be dried-off quickly and may even need to be brought inside until they are dry and able to nurse. Treatment of frostbitten parts includes warming the affected part and ensuring that the animal is put in a warmer area. Call your veterinarian if you suspect that your animal has frostbite.

Because newborn animals have difficulty maintaining their temperature for the first several days of life, they should receive special attention during cold weather. If a newborn's temperature drops below 100 degrees F, provide supplemental heat and make sure they are receiving adequate nutrition from the mother. Very cold animals will often bunch up together and some animals may be crushed to death, so provide enough warmth to prevent crowding.

It may get so cold that the only humane thing to do is bring small animals indoors. In particular, rabbits, cats, dogs, and poultry may need supplemental heat or protection. How can you tell if an animal is cold? If an animal is shivering it needs added warmth; either cover it with a blanket or sweater, provide heat, or bring it into a workroom or storage area. Animals that have become extremely hypothermic often stop shivering. Use a rectal thermometer and take the temperature of any animal you think might be chilled; call your veterinarian if the temperature is less than 100° F. If you do bring animals inside, try to avoid drastic changes in temperatures such as bringing an animal in from 0° F outdoors to a 70° F living room; large changes in temperature can predispose an animal to pneumonia.
Thick winter coats can make animals look fat, but looks can be deceiving! The only way to be certain that an animal is in good condition is to touch the animal. Many animals are "skin and bones" underneath their thick coat. Sadly, some animals can literally starve to death on full stomach if they are fed a poor quality diet; assessing body condition regularly will help prevent starvation from becoming a fatal surprise.

Ethylene glycol antifreeze is very toxic to humans and animals. Most cases of poisoning seem to occur during very cold and very hot weather. Typical antifreeze is sweet tasting and attractive to animals, especially those that need water. If you suspect that an animal has ingested even a little antifreeze, contact your veterinarian right away. Treatment is available and effective, but it must be administered immediately to prevent fatal kidney damage. Prevention is best: clean up all antifreeze spills promptly, keep antifreeze tightly capped and stored carefully, and consider using the new non-toxic antifreeze with propylene glycol.

Another seasonal threat to animals -- particularly cats -- is automobile fan belts. Outdoor cats sometimes climb up under car hoods and get next to the engine for warmth. This is fine until the engine is started and the cat gets caught in the fan belt. To prevent such a tragedy, bang on the hood of your car before you start the motor.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has a toll-free Ani-Med® line that links the caller to recorded information on a variety of pet care topics. The number is 1-888-252-7387. You must enter the three digit code for the topic you are interested in learning about, so go to [http://www.berkshumane.org/animed/animedindex.html](http://www.berkshumane.org/animed/animedindex.html) on the internet to find out what the codes are.

If you provide plenty of high quality feed, keep animals dry, provide shelter and ensure access to water, your efforts will go a long way toward keeping your animals healthy during the cold months ahead. Taking good care of your animals will give you a warm feeling, too!