**Top tips for keeping your dog safe in winter**

**As the temperature drops and the nights draw in, our thoughts start turn to Christmas and cosy nights in by the fire. Whilst our worries about sunburn and heatstroke in our four legged friends, may now seem like a dim and distant memory, we must remember that winter still poses its own threats to dogs.**

This article identifies some of these risks and hazards. It gives tips on how to keep dogs safe and spot issues as soon as they arise.

**Hypothermia and frostbite**

Some dogs are more prone to hypothermia than others. These include the very young and old, small (e.g. Chihuahua) or slim (e.g. greyhound) breeds, and those with underlying health conditions and thin coats. Hypothermia is more likely in dogs with wet fur.

When a dog’s body gets cold, it tries to persevere heat by reducing blood supply to the extremities (toes, ears, tail). This puts them at risk of frostbite too.

**Ice, snow and grit**

Ice and snow can become trapped between dogs’ toes and cause irritation and/or frostbite.

Rock salt used to clear ice from roads and pavements can irritate or burn dogs’ skin. The high sodium content in rock salt can also cause tummy upsets if swallowed e.g. if licked from the paws, and even kidney damage if ingested in large qualities.

Ice on frozen lakes, ponds and rivers can become thin. Dogs that run on frozen water are at risk of falling through and drowning or becoming hypothermic.

**Antifreeze**

Antifreeze contains ethylene glycol, which is sweet to taste and very palatable for pets. Dogs may drink from puddles contaminated by spills e.g. from leaky radiators, or may lick the compound off their fur.

Even small amounts can cause significant kidney damage. The first sign is that the dog appears drunk. Toxicity progresses rapidly and dogs soon show lethargy, vomiting, excessive thirst, seizures and collapse.

Ethylene glycol poisoning is often fatal. If you think a dog might have ingested antifreeze, you must seek immediate veterinary attention.

**Top tips for keeping your dog safe this winter:**

* Never leave a dog unattended outdoors in cold weather, for a prolonged period of time.
* Keep their foot hair short to avoid ice or snow balls forming.
* Inspect, rinse or wipe a dog’s paws after a wintery walk to remove balls of ice or rock salt from between the toes.
* Towel dry wet dogs after a walk to prevent hypothermia. If your dog is very young, old, thin or unwell – consider using a coat and/or boots.
* Avoid letting dogs swim in water on really cold days unless you know you can get them warm and dry immediately afterwards.
* When out walking in the dark, use lights and bright/reflective clothing and accessories for you and your dog, to ensure you can be seen.
* Never let a dog drink from puddles near where cars have been parked, in case they are contaminated by antifreeze.
* Take extra care of golden oldies. Flare ups of osteoarthritis are common in colder weather. If they seem stiff or uncomfortable, get them checked out by a vet.
* Be aware that heatstroke can still occur, even in winter. Dogs at risk include those that exercise vigorously whilst wearing coats, are brought into a warm house immediately afterwards or lie too close to a heat source e.g. fire.

**This article was written by** [**Dr Vicky Strong MRCVS**](http://www.drvictoriastrong.com/)**. It is for general information only. Always speak to a veterinary professional if you have any concerns about your dog’s health.**

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