

Dog care below freezing: How to keep your pet warm and safe from weather, road salt

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Time outside with your dog in the spring, summer and fall can be lovely. Visiting your favorite downtown café on a cool spring morning, going to a favorite dog park on a clear summer evening or going on walks along a

river when the leaves are changing color are all wonderful when the weather is favorable. But in much of the country, when winter rolls around, previously hospitable conditions can quickly turn chilly and dangerous for people and pups alike.

Winter brings some unique challenges for dog owners, since dogs still need activity and socialization during colder seasons. Studies have shown that [dog owners](#) are almost 50% less likely to walk their dogs [when the weather gets cold](#). Knowing the basics of winter safety is critical to maintaining a healthy lifestyle for your dog.

I am an [assistant professor](#) at the University of California Davis School of Veterinary Medicine who weathered polar vortexes with my dog while living in Michigan early in my career. While I've since moved to sunny California, I've seen how quickly [frigid temperatures](#) can turn dangerous for pets.

Breed and age differences

Not all dogs have the same abilities to deal with cold weather. A short-coated dog like a Chihuahua is much more susceptible to the dangers of cold weather than a thick-coated husky. When the weather dips below 40°F (4°C), the well-acclimated husky may be comfortable, whereas the Chihuahua would shiver and be at risk of hypothermia.

Additionally, if your dog is used to warm weather, but you decide to move to a colder region, the dog will need time to acclimate to that colder weather, even if they have a thick coat.

Age also affects cold-weather resilience. Puppies and elderly dogs can't withstand the chill as well as other dogs, but every dog is unique—each may have individual health conditions or [physical attributes](#) that make them more or less resilient to cold weather.

When is my dog too cold?

Pet owners should be able to recognize the symptoms of a dog that is getting too cold. Dogs will shiver, and some may vocalize or whine. Dogs may resist putting their feet down on the cold ground, or burrow, or try to find warmth in their environment when they are uncomfortable.

Just like people, [dogs can get frostbite](#). And just like people, the signs can take days to appear, making it hard to assess them in the moment. The most common sites for frostbite in dogs are their ears and the tips of their tails. Some of the initial signs of frostbite are skin discoloring, turning paler than normal, or purple, gray or even black; red, blistered skin; swelling; pain at the site; [or ulceration](#).

Other [serious signs of hypothermia](#) include sluggishness or lethargy, and if you observe them, please visit your veterinarian immediately. A good rule to live by is if it is too cold for you, it is too cold for your dog.

Getting your dog a [sweater or jacket](#) and [paw covers](#) can provide them with protection from the elements and keep them comfortable. Veterinarians also recommend closely monitoring your dog and limiting their time outside when the temperature nears the freezing point or drops below it.

Road salt dangers

Road salt that treats ice on streets and sidewalks [can also harm dogs](#). When dogs walk on the salt, the sharp, rough edges of the salt crystals can irritate the sensitive skin on their paws.

Dogs will often lick their feet when they're dirty, wet or irritated, and if they ingest any salt doing that, they may face GI upset, dehydration,

kidney failure, seizures or even death. Even small amounts of pure salt can [disrupt critical body functions](#) in dogs.

Some companies make pet-safe salt, but in public it can be hard to tell what type of salt is on the ground. After walking your dog, wash off their feet or boots. You can also keep their paw fur trimmed to prevent snow from balling up or [salt](#) collecting in the fur. Applying a thin layer of petroleum jelly or [paw pad balm](#) to the skin of the paw pads can also help protect your pet's paws from irritation.

Antifreeze risks

[Antifreeze, or ethylene glycol](#), is in most vehicles to prevent the fluids from freezing when it gets cold out. Some people pour antifreeze into their toilets when away from their home to prevent the water in the toilet from freezing.

Antifreeze is an exceptionally dangerous chemical to dogs and cats, as it tastes sweet but can be deadly when ingested. If a pet ingests even a small amount of antifreeze, the substance causes a chemical cascade in their body that results in severe kidney damage. If left untreated, the pet may have [permanent kidney damage or die](#).

There are safer antifreeze options on the market that use ingredients other than [ethylene glycol](#). If your dog ingests antifreeze, please see your veterinarian immediately for treatment.

When temperatures dip below freezing, the best thing pet owners can do is keep the time spent outside as minimal as possible. Try some [indoor activities](#), like hide-and-seek with low-calorie treats, fetch or even an interactive obstacle course. Food puzzles can also keep your dog mentally engaged during indoor time.

Although winter presents some unique challenges, it can still be an enjoyable and healthy time for you and your canine companion.

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