

Out in the cold

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Canadian prairie winter means frigid temperatures, snow, icy roads and people endlessly venting about the cold weather. As we snuggle under our comforters, we tend to forget that bitter cold has the same effect on animals as it does on humans. Depending on how low the mercury dips, few pets or strays can fend for themselves outdoors during the winter.

There is a common false belief that dogs will be “fine” if left outdoors. Certain breeds of dogs, such as huskies, can handle cold weather, but the majority of dogs need their owner’s help and intervention. Outdoor dogs must be protected by a dry, draft-free doghouse that is small enough to hold in body heat but large enough to allow the dog to sit and lie down comfortably. Insulation, such as straw, will help retain body heat. Several pet and feed stores carry safe heated floor mats or non-electric warm bedding.

Cats are the most vulnerable to winter weather, more so than dogs. They should never be left outdoors for any extended period of time. Some owners mistakenly believe that cats can adapt to the outdoors and will leave them outside for unlimited periods of time. This can put their pets in serious



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danger. Contrary to popular belief, a fur coat does not always keep you or a cat warm



all through the winter.

All pets need adequate shelter from the elements and insulation against cold weather. They should not be left outside for long periods in freezing weather. Wind chill can threaten a pet’s life. Like humans, dogs and cats can suffer from hypothermia and frostbite. Senior pets and young animals are especially at risk in the wintertime.

Pets are more likely to become lost in the winter as the search for warmth takes them into basements, garages, or other areas where they might become trapped. Dogs also become lost and unable to find their way home as they can lose their scent in snow and ice. Avoid letting your dog off leash in snow or ice, and always make sure ID tags are well fastened.

Many pets die each year as a result of antifreeze poisoning because they are attracted to the sweet flavor. When winterizing your car, be sure to stow antifreeze safely out of reach of pets and children and wipe up any spills thoroughly. Using antifreeze that contains propylene glycol rather than ethylene glycol reduces both the toxicity and flavour appeal.

Salt and other substances used to remove snow may stick to feet and irritate a pet’s

paws and may be fatal if ingested. Wipe your pet’s paws immediately when you come indoors using a moist cloth. Avoid walking dogs where these chemicals have been placed. There are pet-friendly ice melts available, which are safer for pets.

Animals need more food in the wintertime because they burn more calories generating heat. Routinely check your pet’s water dish to make sure water is fresh and not frozen. Use plastic food and water bowls rather than metal. When the temperature is low, your pet’s tongue can stick and freeze to metal.

Unwanted pets or strays are particularly vulnerable in the winter. To an animal lover, there are few sights as poignant as a dog or cat shivering alone on a bitter winter day. The fate of homeless animals is bleak as they face starvation, succumb to the harsh elements or are killed on our roads. Thousands of dogs, cats and other animals are euthanized in animal shelters across Canada every year.

Unfortunately, the supply of adoptable animals far outpaces the demand of responsible pet owners. If more people searched for a family pet at an animal shelter or rescue facility, this situation could be entirely preventable. If you are considering a pet for the holidays please consider an animal from a shelter or rescue. The best holiday gift you can give a homeless animal would be a warm, loving home.