



Keeping our pets warm during winter

Winter comes with cooler temperatures and a chilly breeze. You may find yourself adding an extra layer of clothing, pulling up those socks and even rugging up with an extra blanket to stay warm...but what about our pets? It is important that we consider our pet's wellbeing during the cooler months, especially if your dog or cat remains outside, as they may need a little help to stay warm and cosy this winter.



Warm clothing - coats

While many dog and cat breeds have a thick fur coat to keep them warm when outside or on walks, they will still likely benefit from an additional winter coat during the cooler temperatures. This is particularly beneficial to older, thin or short-haired breeds, which tend to feel the cold much faster.

Is there a perfect coat for my pet? Coats nowadays come in many colours, shapes and sizes, and with very fancy accessories. To prevent a choking hazard, make sure there are no dangling cords or buttons that can be easily chewed and swallowed. It is important to make sure that your pet's coat doesn't restrict movement or breathing (not too tight!) and provides good coverage from the neck to the base of the tail and also protection over their belly. If your pet is in a heated indoor environment, the added coat can be removed to prevent any over-heating.

Bedding

As temperatures drop, you may find your pet spending more time snuggled up in their bed. Ideally, keeping your dog and cat indoors over the winter period would be beneficial to them, however, if your dog or cat is an outdoor pet, then changing their routine may be a little tricky. You can help keep your pet comfortable by making some simple adjustments to their bedding. Ensure your pet's bed is free from drafts and remains elevated from hard, cold surfaces. You can raise their bedding off the ground by adding an extra blanket underneath, and one for the top to keep them warm and comfortable. For older dogs and cats you don't want to raise their bed too high, as cooler temperatures can be problematic with their joints and they may find it difficult getting in and out of their bed, particularly after long periods of rest.

For outdoor pets, make sure they have access to an insulated shelter, such as a kennel or enclosed area, with a warm dry blanket. Make sure the location of your pet's housing will protect them from rain, wind and cold drafts. Be sure to wash blankets regularly.

Heat seeking

Some pets may shiver or tremble when they are cold. You may find your pet laying on the carpet rather than tiled surfaces, cuddled up on the lounge, or even in your bed. If your pet likes to camp out near a heat source (eg heater), make sure to check on them regularly because their skin can dry out and if they get too close they can suffer severe burns.

Senior care

Just like people, the cold weather can be harder on our older dogs and cats, as low temperatures can aggravate joints riddled with arthritis. If your pet is a bit tubby, the extra weight can worsen joint pain. A healthy exercise regime during winter is still important for your pet, but make sure you don't over do it. Try and limit your dog walks to no more than 20 minutes a day, and avoid steep hills or uneven ground.

Arthritis is a degenerative joint disease which causes inflammation of the joints. If your pet has arthritis, their cartilage lining of the joints has worn down, resulting in inflammation, pain and swelling.

Signs of arthritis in dogs:

- Stiffness or slowness when getting up or down - particularly after periods of rest
- Difficulty walking up or down stairs
- Limping / lameness
- Lagging behind on walks or reluctance to exercise
- Yelping when touched
- Licking or chewing affected joints

Unlike dogs, cats are great at hiding pain and they don't tend to limp with arthritis. Instead, we generally see a change in their behaviour.

Signs of arthritis in cats:

- Unwillingness to jump
- Stiffness or slowness when getting up or down from furniture - particularly after periods of rest
- Difficulty or inability to get in and out of their kitty litter trays, often resulting in toileting accidents
- Reduced grooming due to pain or discomfort, or over grooming of painful joints resulting in self trauma eg. hair loss, inflamed or infected skin
- Change in personality - more aggressive than normal eg. less tolerant of patting, holding or brushing
- Reluctance to use a scratching post

Managing arthritis in dogs and cats

1. Weight management is extremely important. Overweight animals will place more weight on their joints and therefore cause more localised inflammation and irritation to affected joints.
2. Exercise management. For dogs, regular and controlled exercise (walking on a leash, swimming) is beneficial to joint

mobility and muscle tone. Uncontrolled exercise (chasing balls) can strain ligaments and damage joints.

3. Home / environmental adjustments. Ensure dogs and cats have access to warm, comfortable bedding away from drafts. Provide steps near their beds or favourite furniture items to aid in getting up and down. For dogs, assist them when getting in and out of a car, or up and down stairs. For cats, make sure kitty litter trays are easy to access and are low-sided to prevent toileting accidents.
4. Veterinary treatments. There are various treatments available when it comes to managing arthritis in pets. The most suitable option will depend on a number of factors, including the age, severity of signs and any other health problems that your pet may have. Talk to your veterinarian who can help you with starting a treatment plan.