

Heat Stroke in Dogs

There are many reasons dogs can become dangerously overheated. Dogs have sweat glands only on the pads of their feet and cool themselves primarily by panting. When the air is hot and humid, they cannot rid themselves of excess heat efficiently. Heat exhaustion or heat stroke is more likely to occur during the first hot day of summer when it is 85 degrees than on a 100 degree day in August. Dogs are used to the heat by the end of summer and typically their owners know enough by then to take it easy. Early in the summer dogs are not yet acclimated to the summer heat.

Common Causes of Heat Stroke

1. Being left in a car in hot weather – even if it is only 70 degrees outside, the inside of a car can quickly rise to over 100 degrees!
2. Physical exertion during the heat of the day – this can include going for a run with the owner, playing outside, running along the backyard fence, etc. Heat stroke can even occur inside if the house is warm and a dog becomes excited, especially in a predisposed breed.
3. Being outdoors in hot weather without access to cool water and shade. Dogs who are tied outside can sometimes get trapped out of reach of shade or water.
4. Being a certain breed whose physical conformation makes them unable to cool themselves effectively. For example, Bulldogs, Boxers and Pugs have short noses, small airways and excess tissue in the back of their throat that can make it difficult to get rid of excess heat.
5. Confinement to a poorly ventilated cage or crate, especially under a cage dryer such as when a dog is groomed.
6. Being overweight
7. Having medical ailments such as heart or airway disease, or any condition that impairs breathing.
8. Being very old or very young.

Symptoms of Heat Stroke

1. Heavy panting – rapid or labored breathing
2. Bright or brick red mucous membranes – the gums just above the teeth are a good place to check color. The gums may also be dry to the touch.
3. Weakness or collapse
4. Elevated rectal temperature – seek immediate veterinary care if over 105°F.
5. Vomiting
6. Bloody diarrhea
7. Dark urine
8. Bruising on skin
9. Bleeding from mouth
10. Seizures or coma
11. Death – can occur within 20 minutes, or in a couple of days from delayed complications such as kidney failure.

Emergency First Aid for Heat Stroke

1. Immediately move the dog indoors or to a cool area. If in an enclosed crate, remove the dog immediately.
2. Wet the dog down with cool water – do not use ice water as that will make internal cooling more difficult by constricting blood vessels
3. Take the rectal temperature – if over 105°F, transport immediately for veterinary care. Know where the nearest emergency clinic is located. Call en route to let them know you are coming.
4. Do not cover your dog during transport, even with a wet towel, as that can prevent heat from escaping.
5. Offer water to drink during transport, though not to a vomiting patient. Only offer small amounts of water.
6. Transport dog in an air-conditioned care or lower the windows so circulating air can help with evaporative cooling.
7. If you are monitoring your dog's rectal temperature during transport, stop cooling measures when it reaches 103°F.
8. Even if your pet seems to respond to treatment, it is still best to have them evaluated by a veterinarian to check for internal problems. Complications from heat stroke can develop several hours later due to organ damage caused by high internal temperatures.

Prevention

1. Do not leave your dog in the car when outdoor temperatures are over 70°F.
2. Restrict activity during the heat of the day.
3. Allow dogs to gradually acclimate to warm weather, especially if they are physically active.
4. Provide access to shade and cool water when dogs are outside.
5. Keep breeds at risk, very old or young dogs, or dogs with health conditions indoors.
6. Ideally, keep all dogs inside when a heat advisory is issued.
7. Use misters, fans or wading pools to provide extra cooling measures for outdoor dogs.