

Helping your pets battle the summer weather

-Barb Cole DVM

As the temperatures rise this summer, we are all finding ways to cope with the heat – a cool dip in the pool, ice filled beverages, retreating to the air conditioned indoors. It's important not to forget what it must feel like for our furry four legged friends. Not only do pets have to wear a thick fur coat all year round, but also they are limited in their abilities to escape the weather.

There is a lot of press coverage out there on the dangers of leaving a pet unattended in a vehicle in the heat. Even in more moderate weather, it can only be a matter of minutes before the inside of a car reaches deadly temperatures. However, with the onset of the summer heat there are a lot of other instances where the high temperatures can be deadly to pets.

Probably most important is to ensure adequate shade and shelter for your pet when outdoors. If your pet is kenneled outside, make sure that there is shade available throughout the entire day as well as access to plenty of water. Consider having multiple bowls available or tip-proof bowls so that the dog is not without water if it knocks its bowl over. Free roaming pets often don't have difficulties finding shade, but keep in mind that this can include under or behind vehicles, so be sure to look around your vehicle before driving. This also applies for pets going with you to work in the fields – stopped farm equipment is a good source of shade, but often results in severe injury.

Cats usually have enough sense to laze around on these hot days. Dogs tend to be a different story. Try to prevent heat stress and heat stroke by exercising in the cooler times of day. If you are leaving the house, carry plenty of water for the dog (and yourself). Know when it is time to take a break – there are a lot of dogs out there that just don't know when to quit. Dogs and cats have no sweat glands (except in their feet), so their main method of cooling off is panting. If your dog is panting heavily, it is time to offer water and stop the activity. To help cool off, some dogs enjoy chewing on ice cubes; you can try offering ice water, or hose the dog down with water. Some toys can be soaked in water then put in the freezer before play. Try activities that will keep the dog cooler, such as going to a pond or creek or playing fetch into a sprinkler. Access to a small kiddie pool in the yard is also a good way for a pet to cool off. If all else fails, don't forget to play indoor games with your pet to burn some energy. Training to do tricks is not only fun (and a good way to show off for your friends), but also helps keep your pet entertained when it is unable to play outside.

Whether you are exercising your pet or not, on hot days it is important to monitor for signs of heat stress – a life threatening rise in internal body temperature. Although this is mainly a problem in dogs, it can occur in cats (as mentioned earlier, most cats are not athletes and do not tend to overexert themselves). Plus, some animals are more susceptible to heat than others. In particular overweight pets, shorter nosed breeds (such as pugs, bulldogs, boxers and boston terriers), and pets with a history of respiratory

problems such as asthma are high risk for heat stress; some may not even need to exercise to overheat.

The main signs of heat stress are vigorous panting, with the pet lying on its side, unable to rise. With milder forms of heat stress, the pet may still be standing, but very agitated and restless. The head may be extended, the legs may be rigid or stiff. If the body temperature stays high for too long, the pet may experience organ failure, may enter into shock, and/or can seizure. Any of these symptoms can ultimately lead to the death of the pet.

To treat heat stress, the goal is to bring the pet's body temperature down as soon as possible, but not too quickly. If you suspect your pet may have heat stress, begin cooling the body with cool water mostly over the belly, legs and head (not cold or ice water) and contact your veterinarian as soon as possible. The pet will likely need additional treatment (such as fluid therapy and medications for shock and potential organ damage) and monitoring, depending on the severity of heat stress.

Like many other health problems, heat stress is much easier to prevent than to treat. Remember that as owners and caregivers, it is our job to help pets have a safe, comfortable summer.

Dr. Cole is a local veterinarian and will begin seeing small animal patients at the O'Neill Veterinary Clinic this August.