

Health and welfare information about your dog from Vetlexicon Canis.



Heat stroke

We have all heard that 'dogs can die in hot cars' - the frightening thing is how quickly this can happen. A healthy dog can suffer fatal damage from heat stroke in only a few minutes in a car. The interior of cars can also reach damaging temperatures on days that do not seem very hot so great care should always be taken before leaving your dog in car. Heat stroke also happens to dogs outside of cars. Whenever it happens it is a true emergency and veterinary attention must be obtained immediately.

What happens in Heat Stroke?

A dog's body temperature is normally maintained between 101°F and 102°F (38.3-38.9°C).

In warm environments dogs regulate their body temperature by panting. If they cannot lose heat fast enough, their body temperature will rise. A rise in body temperature of just 3 degrees (to a temperature of 105°F (40.5°C)) can be very serious for your pet. If body temperature increases to 108°F (42.2°C), the important organs like the heart, brain, liver and kidneys become damaged. Even immediate treatment and effective cooling can leave the dog with internal damage that may affect long term health.

Why do dogs get heat stroke?

Leaving your dog in a hot car is a sure way to bring on heat stroke as temperatures inside the car can rise to fatal levels within a few minutes. However, car temperatures can rise to dangerous levels even on days which appear cool. Whilst being locked in a hot car is an obvious cause of heat stroke dogs can be affected in other ways too. A dog left outside in the heat without adequate shade, or exercised in hot/humid conditions is also at risk.

Large dogs especially those with heavy hair coats understandably find it more difficult to lose excess heat and are more at risk of getting overheated. Brachycephalic breeds (those with short noses), eg boxers and bulldogs have inefficient panting mechanisms and may be more affected by environmental temperatures than other breeds.

What are the early signs of Heat Stroke?

Recognition of the early signs of heat strokes is very important. Initially changes include rapid breathing, dry mouth and nose (drooling can be seen later), unsteadiness, fast heart rate, and dull greyish or red gums. Vomiting and diarrhoea are not uncommon. This is an EMERGENCY! Even at the earliest stage of heat stroke, you may be fighting for your dog's life. You must get your dog to a vet as soon as possible. These signs can be followed in minutes by collapse, seizures (fits), coma and death.

Can I do anything to help my dog?

Do not delay in contacting your vet but you may need to take steps to cool your dog whilst awaiting veterinary attention. Move the dog from the hot environment and start cooling by placing cool, wet towels over the back and neck and tummy/groin and also by applying cool water to the ear flaps and paws. Directing a fan onto the dog can also be helpful.

Do not use cold water or ice or overcool your dog - it is best to use water at cool tap water temperature.

Seek emergency veterinary help as soon as you can. Ask someone else to call the vet while you start to cool your pet.

How will my vet help my dog?

Your vet will need to admit your dog to the hospital for treatment. In the early stages the most important action is to reduce your dog's body temperature. This can be achieved with cooling baths and fans and administration of cool fluids into the blood and cool enemas.

Once the body temperature has been reduced any additional problems caused by the overheating need to be addressed. Your vet will need to do many blood tests to monitor the function of organs such as the kidneys and liver. Dogs that survive the initial few hours following over heating will often need to be in intensive care for many days. Clotting disorders are very common in the aftermath of heat stroke and your vet will want to monitor your pet closely.

Will my dog get better?

Heat stroke is a very serious condition and sadly many dogs do not survive. However with prompt treatment some dogs will make a full recovery. Others may survive but may be left with permanent damage. Prevention is definitely the safest option!

Heat stroke is a very frightening condition and can kill a healthy animal in as little as 20 minutes. Prevention is your best protection but if you do suspect heat stroke in your dog then immediate veterinary attention is essential. If you have any questions regarding this or any other aspects of your dogs health please contact your vet for advice.