Pet Care in Cold Temperatures

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When temperatures drop to the single digits and below, I'm glad I have an indoor job. Unfortunately, not everyone does. When I was still at home on the farm, caring for our calving moms was a constant challenge. We put the cows that looked like they were going to calve in the barn, but there was always that one that fooled us. Dad would bring the cold baby into the house, and Mom would work to save that baby. It was joy to our ears when we heard that baby stand up and want to eat. My hat is off to the farmers and ranchers caring for animals. It is not a fun time and constant work keeping them fed, ice chipped and a dry place to for them to lay down.

Farmers and ranchers work to keep their animals safe in these cold temperatures but what about you and your pets. Susan Nelson clinical associate professor of clinical sciences at the university's Veterinary Health Center gives some tips on caring for indoor and outdoor pets.

One of the most important things to remember if you have outdoor pets is that they have adequate shelter, water and extra food, Nelson said. Appropriate shelter can be housing that is big enough for your pet to move around in, but not so big that it is going to lose heat. Shelters also should face toward the south or west and have a tarp to block the wind.

"Use clean straw or cedar shavings in shelters instead of towels and blankets to give animals something to nestle in, which helps to insulate them from the cold," Nelson said. "Towels and blankets get trampled down and absorb moisture, making them ineffective at conserving heat."

Nelson offers these tips for your pet's safety when temperatures dip below freezing:

• As a general rule, if it's below freezing, don't leave your pet outside any longer than you would be yourself. "We often see increased cases of frostbite on pets' noses, ears and pads of their feet if they are left outside too long." Nelson said.

• Very young and very old animals cannot regulate their body temperature as easily as a mature, healthy animal, which makes it easier for them to develop hypothermia.

• Never leave your pets unattended in a vehicle during the winter months, as it can be just as deadly as the summer. "An enclosed vehicle can be similar to a freezer, and temperatures can drop very low," Nelson said.

• Outdoor cats often use heat from car engines to stay warm. Honk your horn or bang on the hood of your vehicle before leaving in the mornings to scare them away.

Additionally, it is just as important to have an emergency bag ready for your pet in case of power outages or ice storms. Emergency bags should contain a few days’ worth of food, water and medication for your pet.

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