

How to keep your pets cozy this winter

By Lisa Bloch

Winter is fast approaching, which means it's time to bring out the heavy coats, rain jackets, boots, and warm blankets. But what about our pets? Most people, especially in temperate California, assume that our pets don't need anything extra in the wintertime, that their fur and instincts are enough to protect them. But that's often not the case.

For dogs, it's important to consider their fur length, size, and breed mix. My previous dog, Digby, was a 65-pound cattle dog mix that had fairly thick fur and seemed impervious to the cold and the rain. However, my current dog, Bowie, is a 17-pound Italian greyhound mix that has short fur and shivers with the slightest breeze. He's also miserable in the rain.

I quickly learned Bowie needed some protection if he was going to join me on our winter hikes, so he now sports either a sweater or raincoat. By the way, these don't have to be the kind your grandmother was fond of putting on her little Maltese — they can be quite sporty. Many have reflective material and are quick-drying.

If you like taking your dog with you to the snow, be sure to watch those paws.

“Check your dog's paws frequently for signs of cold-weather injury or damage, such as cracked paw pads or bleeding,” the American Veterinary Medical Association says. “During a walk, a sudden lameness may be due to an injury or may be due to ice accumulation between its toes. You may be able to reduce the chance of iceball accumulation by clipping the hair between your dog's toes.”

If your dog will tolerate them, consider a pair of booties for those sensitive paws.

Just as human skin tends to get dry and itchy in cold weather, a dog's skin is also prone to winter itchiness. Keep winter baths to a minimum and consider adding a tiny dose of olive oil or coconut oil to your dog's food; it can help to moisturize their skin.

Beyond comfort, you also need to keep your pets' safety in mind. Most people realize it's dangerous to leave a dog in a hot car but did you know it's also dangerous to leave them in a cold one? In cold weather, cars can act like a refrigerator and pets can die from hypothermia.

While cats fare slightly better than dogs in the cold, given their ability to crawl into warm, enclosed spaces, this same skill can sometimes get them in trouble. Every winter, we receive reports of kitties getting stuck in garages or sheds. They may also take refuge under the hood of a car, which can be dangerous and even deadly. Experts recommend giving the hood of your car a few taps before starting your engine just in case any cats found their way under it.

While it's technically legal to leave dogs outside as long as they have some coverage from the elements, Marin Humane strongly encourages people to keep their pets indoors. The basic rule of thumb is that if it's too cold for you, it's too cold for them.

Worried about your pets going stir-crazy if you keep them inside? Well, just like with kids, it's all about introducing some indoor games. There's nothing to say a game of fetch has to be outdoors. Or that a cat wand can't be just as enchanting as that lizard outside.

There are a ton of options for winterizing your pet, including an array of jackets, sweaters, and toys. So have fun with your pets this winter but be sure to play it safe.

Lisa Bloch is the marketing and communications director for Marin Humane, which contributes Tails of Marin articles and welcomes animal-related questions and stories about the people and animals in our community. Go to marinhumane.org, find us on social media @marinhumane, or email lbloch@marinhumane.org.