

K-State Veterinarian says hot weather, dogs and outdoor activities may not mix

Written by Wauneta Breeze
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By Robert Tigner

Extension Educator

Hot weather is here, and that means both dogs and their owners can enjoy more outdoor activities. But a Kansas State University veterinarian says hot weather can be dangerous for dogs.

Even on moderately warm days, dogs can succumb to heat stroke, said Dr. Susan Nelson, assistant professor of clinical sciences at K-State's College of Veterinary Medicine.

"The temperature has a lot to do with heat stress and heat-related illnesses, but pet owners should also take the humidity level into consideration before taking their pets outdoors," she said.

Dogs dissipate heat primarily through panting and a small amount of sweating through their paws. This is a small area compared to humans and other animals that sweat through their whole bodies, Nelson said.

"Because sweat doesn't evaporate as quickly when there is a lot of moisture in the air, it becomes even easier for a dog to become overheated, even in relatively cooler temperatures," she said.

Any dog can overheat on a warm summer day, but short-faced breeds such as pugs and bulldogs are at a higher risk as they cannot dissipate heat as well through their panting, Nelson said. The extra exertion needed to cool themselves leads to secondary swelling and compromise of their airways. When your dog's body temperature gets too high, the organs will start shutting down. In severe cases, there is irreversible organ damage and death, she said.

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Nelson said the earlier you detect symptoms of heat stress in your dog and stop to cool off the animal, the less likely it will experience permanent damage.

Nelson said some signs of heat stress in dogs include:

- * Dry gums, increased panting and thick drool.

- * A darker tongue, particularly in the early stages of heat stress. Gums may be pale and grey in the later stages.

- * Appearing uncoordinated or collapsing.

- * Vomiting and diarrhea.

If your dog experiences any of these symptoms, Nelson said you should quickly get it into an air-conditioned building or in the shade and wet it down with cool water. Ice-cold water or ice should not be used because it can cause the blood vessels to constrict and trap in heat. Putting a fan in front of the animal while it's being wet down will help to cool it off faster, she said.

If out walking or jogging with your dog and you notice signs of heat stress, Nelson said to quickly find the nearest water source and shade.

“Don’t try to make it the rest of the way home as it may be too late by the time you get there,” she said. “If your dog’s condition is severe enough to require a trip to your veterinarian, wet it down first and start the cooling process before you leave. It is important to get to the veterinarian as quickly as possible, so you leave as soon as the animal is wet.”

To reduce the risk of heat stress in dogs, Nelson recommends owners exercise them in the

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evenings or early in the morning when it is cooler. Also, like humans, dogs need to be conditioned before walking or jogging long distances. Begin with shorter distances, and gradually increase them as the dog's stamina also increases. A well-conditioned dog will be able to handle the heat and humidity better than a dog is out of shape, she said.

Finally, never leave your dog in your car on a warm day, Nelson said.

“Every year thousands of pets succumb to heat stroke because they were left in cars while their owners ran a few quick errands,” she said. “In just one hour on a 70-degree day, the inside temperature of your vehicle can soar to over 110 degrees. It’s just not worth the risk.”