

Weatherize Your Dog From the Cold

There is a common misconception that all outdoor pets do “just fine” in cold weather if they are simply allowed to “get acclimated”. People don’t seem to realize that when it gets below zero they might need to bring their dogs inside. Just because a dog is an “outside dog”, it does not mean the dog is an “outdoor-below-zero dog”.

That said, in Alaska, many Saints and Huskies can live outside in -40°F and -50°F as long as they have some kind of proper shelter away from wind and other weather conditions. These dogs are acclimated to such severe weather conditions, whereas most dogs are not. Even the racing huskies need extra care in extreme conditions -- a lesson that can be applied to family pets. Don’t overestimate your Saint’s ability to cope with cold weather.

Dog House

Some put light bulbs in the dog houses for a little added warmth. Take care not to use a heat lamp, space heater or other device not approved for use with animals. Some pet stores sell heated mats for pets to sleep on, but again, caution and good sense are needed, especially for dogs that are chewers and might chew the cord.

Start with a small, cozy, insulated dog house. Bigger is not better! The house needs to be small to trap and hold your dog’s body heat which will help keep him warm through the night. It should be just large enough for your dog to stand up, turn around and lie down in comfortably. The house can be homemade but new insulated plastic models available today are inexpensive and designed especially for comfort in cold weather.

Put the house in a sheltered location out of the wind. Take advantage of the sun’s warmth by putting it on the east or south side of your home. Placing it on a low platform to keep it off the frozen ground will help, too. The house should have a door or heavy flap over the entrance to keep out drafts.

Opinions are divided when it comes to insulating dog houses. Using straw or blankets will help retain a dog’s body heat, but some dogs are prone to chewing and can get into trouble eating these items. Blankets and quilts are alright for people inside heated homes but outside, they trap moisture that can make your dog damp, chilly and uncomfortable. A better bedding is fresh clean hay or straw. They allow moisture to evaporate, retain warmth, are biodegradable and cost only a few dollars a bale. Cedar shavings work for some, but they can be irritating to the skin, so use with caution. The best of these is “salt marsh” hay. All are readily available from farm supply and feed stores, stables, or local farmers. When buying straw or hay, use your nose! It should smell fresh and pleasant like dried grass clippings. Avoid any that smells strongly of mold or mildew. Spread the bedding generously in the dog house, four-to-five inches thick. You will need to replace it frequently to prevent mold and mildew, and it gets damp when wet and will attract bugs and rodents.

Care of Paw Pads

When going for walks in the winter, salt used for de-icing roads and sidewalks can make your dog’s paw pads cracked and sore. It dries out your dog’s pads. To prevent this, wash your dog’s toes and pads with warm water after walks to remove any salt residue and dry them thoroughly.

Dog booties are available to protect paws, but many dogs do not like to wear them, and baby oil or bagbalm rubbed on and between the pads helps keep pads pliable and eliminate ice build-up when snow and slush cover the ground, streets, and sidewalks.

Keep the hair between your dog’s toes and pads clipped short, even with the bottom of the foot. When hair is left too long, snow sticks to it, forming ice balls that are uncomfortable and hard to remove. Long hair between the pads also reduces traction, making it easier for your dog to slip and hurt himself on the ice.

Good nail care is important, too. Nails that are too long also reduce traction. They force the dog to walk on the backs of his feet, splaying his toes. The greater the space between his toes, the more snow will pack up between them.



Water

Dogs need fresh water available to them all day especially in winter when their bodies are vulnerable to dehydration. A twice daily watering isn't enough. Metal objects conduct and lose heat quickly so switching to a heavy rubber bowl will help. So will your choice of color, container size and location – dark colors absorb heat from the sun and a deeper dish will freeze less quickly than a wide, shallow one. In areas where sub-freezing temperatures are common, a more efficient solution is an electric bucket heater or birdbath de-icer. A dog can't get enough water from just eating snow, and it uses extra energy to melt the snow.

Food

Dogs may tend to eat more during cold weather, but inclement weather may prevent them from getting enough exercise to burn off extra calories. If Fido begins begging at the table or looking particularly wistful when her dish is empty, beware of "just letting her lick the plates" or tossing her a bit of cheese or chicken when you're fixing dinner. If you're not careful, she'll need an exercise regimen to slim her waist when spring rolls around.

Food tends to sit around the house during the holidays. Dogs quickly learn about hard candy in that bowl on the coffee table or the box of chocolates that the boss sent over. And they learn to beg food from guests at a party or from kids who trail Christmas cookie crumbs throughout the house. Some dogs will eat wrappers and all in their haste to down the prize before discovery.

Chocolate, of course, is poisonous to dogs, but the toxicity depends on the amount of theobromine in the particular candy the dog has eaten. Dark chocolate and baking chocolate tend to be high in the substance; milk chocolate tends to have little. Shasta might eat a piece or two of milk chocolate with few or no ill effects, but a bar of baking chocolate could kill her.