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February 17, 2011

2/17/2011 8:30:00 AM
Local experts give tips to keep pets healthy in winter
 Rachel Wittrock
 Regional Reporter

Between the harsh winds and bitter cold temperatures, Wisconsin winters can be rough, and not just for people, but also for their animals.

It is best to keep pets inside during the winter months, but if that is not allowable, owners should make sure to increase their pet's food supply, provide a living space that is dry and out of the wind and make sure pets are properly watered. If a pet is staying outside, its water bowl should have a heater so the water does not freeze.

Greg Stephan, a veterinarian at the Sun Prairie Animal Hospital, said it is important to keep in mind the age and condition of pets. Young and healthy pets are better able to handle cold weather than older animals. He said although younger pets can handle the cold weather better, people should be careful with puppies because they do not have the fat stores adults do until 10-14 months of age. Long-haired dog breeds will also handle the cold better than thin-haired breeds.

In addition to cold weather, the number of pet toxins increases in winter. Salt and antifreeze both harm pets, and antifreeze can kill a pet in a matter of hours if untreated.

"Antifreeze is probably the number one winter toxicity we see," Stephan said. "It causes kidney failure – rapidly. It is probably one of the most potent toxicities we have."

It takes just a small amount of antifreeze to kill a pet – two ounces can kill a dog and just one teaspoon can be lethal to a cat. Once the antifreeze is ingested, it causes crystallization of the kidneys, which causes kidney failure.

Because waiting for test results will often be too late to save an animal, Stephan said he treats on suspicion.

"The problem is it is an expensive treatment, and you have to have suspicions of it because to test for it and wait for test results and then treat, you are probably going to be too late," he said. "Sometimes if you look at a quick urine sample you see millions and millions of calcium oxalate crystals, but by the time that happens you are probably too late."

There are safer products available though. Sierra antifreeze, which is made with propylene glycol instead of ethylene glycol, is less toxic and safer for children, pets, wildlife and the environment.

For dog breeds like spaniels that have more hair on their toes, Stephan suggests keeping the hair trimmed. Ice balls can form on pets with longer hair on their toes, cutting the pet's pads and even causing frostbite.

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In addition to antifreeze and salt, chocolate, poinsettias, mistletoe and lilies are also toxic to pets. Stephan said lilies pose a greater threat to felines because they are more likely to eat

plants than their canine counterparts.

Owners should also make sure their dog or cat is spayed or neutered. If a pet is spayed before its second or third heat cycle, it can prevent unwanted pregnancies, as well as ovarian and uterine tumors and the risk of associated infections.

"If they are spayed prior to their second or third cycle, it will prevent almost all mammary tumors in the dog and cat world," Stephan said. "Fifty percent of them [mammary tumors] in the dog world are malignant [and] 80 percent in the cat world are malignant, so most of the time they are terminal."

Although mammary tumors can be removed and chemotherapies are available, Stephan said treatments can cost between \$3,000-6,000, depending on the treatment and size of the animal.

Neutering is just as important because it eliminates the risk of testicular cancer and most prostate, anal and rectal cancers in pets. Neutered males also have lower levels of aggression and are less likely to wander when they smell the pheromones of a female in heat.

February is also National Pet Dental Month, and according to Lisa Lasack, the vice president of the Animart pet division in Madison, there are four steps pet owners can take to ensure their pet's teeth are healthy for years to come.

• **Proper diet.** Lasack said a pet's diet is important to ensuring healthy teeth. While many owners may prefer to feed their cat or dog canned food, dry kibble is a better option because it scratches tartar off teeth. Many dry pet foods also contain enzymes that protect against tartar.

• **Treats and toys.** Treats and toys are also good for a dog or cat's teeth because they rub teeth and gums and contain an enzyme that is good for teeth.

• **Brushing.** Lasack also recommended brushing a pet's teeth. She said it is best to start when pets are young so they get used to it.

"Their teeth can actually rot and they can get periodontal disease," she said. "Dogs and cats can't tell you it hurts, and people don't necessarily know that it is an issue."

• **Dental exams.** Lasack recommended making an appointment with a veterinarian for a dental exam. She said sometimes a dog will come in for a dental exam, and its teeth will be in so poor condition that they will fall out or need to be pulled when cleaning.

Similar to people, dogs and cats can suffer from tartar and plaque buildup, gingivitis or even periodontal disease, which can cause a dog or cat's teeth to fall out. Lasack said 80 percent of dogs show signs of oral or dental disease by age three.

"What happens is the bacteria that causes it travels through the blood stream and could damage vital organs," she said.

Signs of dental disease include plaque buildup on teeth, bad gums and bad breath, which is caused when teeth rot.

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