

# Pet Safety Guide: Seasonal Hazards and How to Protect Your Pet

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The risks for dogs and cats change with the seasons, from sunburn and ticks to allergies and snakes. So here are our tips for keeping your pet safe, all year round.



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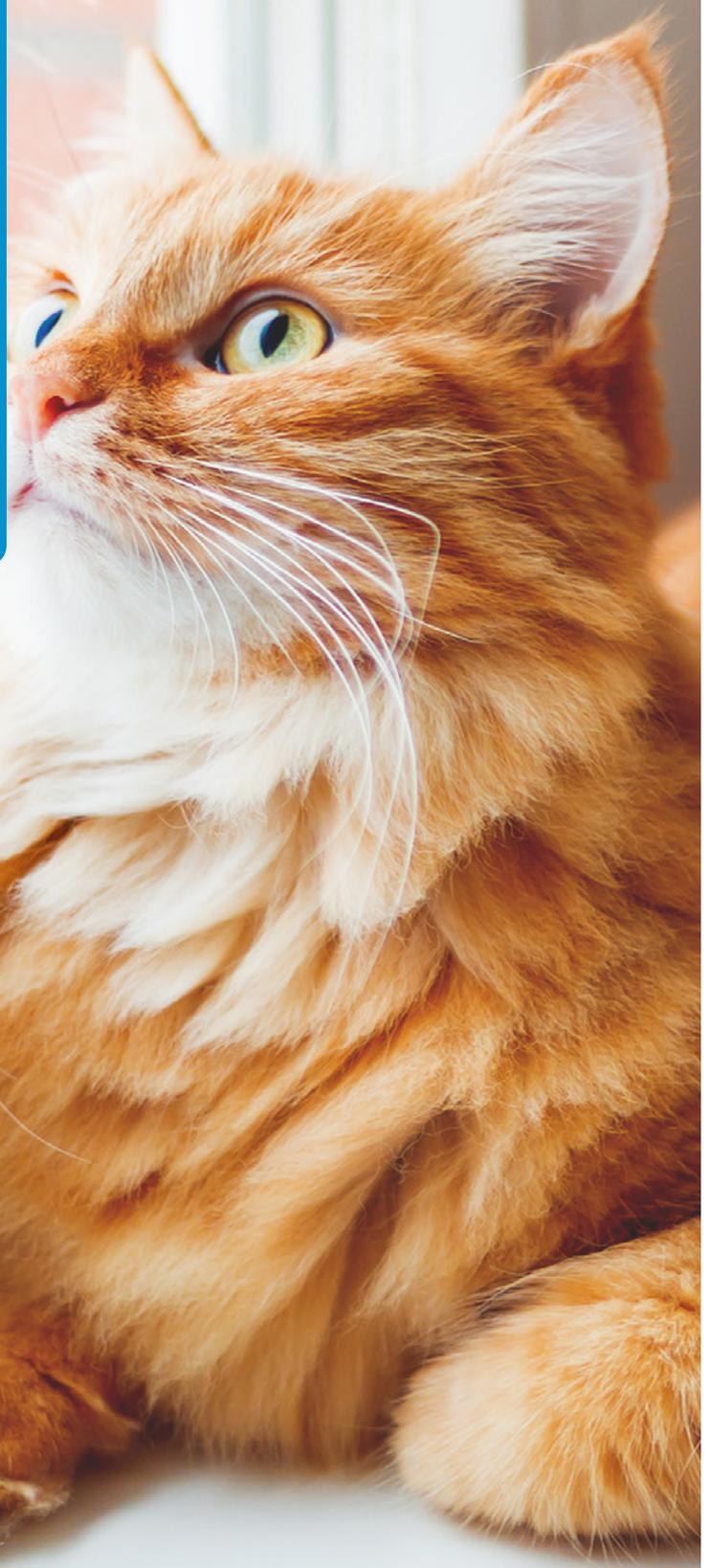
## Pet Safety Checklist

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# Introduction: Protecting your pet

Our pets are as close as family and friends - sometimes closer - and while we depend on them for comfort and companionship, they depend on us for almost everything. Food, water and shelter are constant needs all year round, but each season brings its own particular dangers. This guide highlights some of the common risks, helps you recognise their signs, and offers a general guide to treatments.



# Pet Safety Tips for Summer

Those summer days, long evenings and time away from work make summer a great time to relax and enjoy life with your pet. But all that heat has its downside. As well as direct sun exposure, the hot weather means insect pests are breeding faster than ever. Heat stroke, sunburn, ticks and heartworm are not to be taken



lightly, so read on for vital tips on how to enjoy the summer with your pets while avoiding the risks it brings.

## Heat stress

When the mercury soars, cats and dogs are vulnerable to heat exhaustion and, in extreme conditions, to heat stroke. A pet suffering heat exhaustion will become dehydrated and weak and their pulse rate will rise. If their distress progresses to become heat stroke, they may have difficulty breathing, become confused and dizzy, suffer muscle tremors or seizures, and possibly fall into a coma.<sup>1</sup>

This condition is life threatening and any pet with heatstroke requires immediate veterinary attention.

Dogs and cats are more susceptible than people to heat stress because they can't cool their bodies in the same way we can.<sup>2</sup> Their thick coats also make it hard to regulate their body temperature, so they rely on panting and external cooling, such as lying on a cold floor, to expel heat from their bodies.

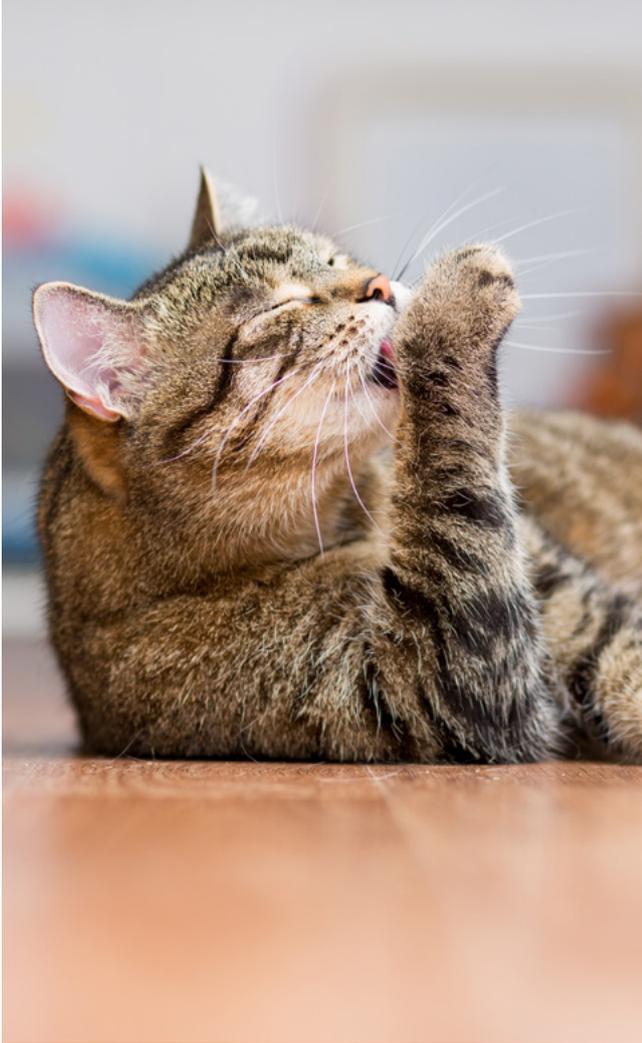
**“While humans have sweat glands all over our bodies, animals have only a few, near their noses and on their feet.”<sup>3</sup>**

To make sure heat stress doesn't get a hold, make sure you always provide your pet with a shaded, well-ventilated environment and plenty of clean, fresh drinking water to prevent dehydration. Keep them off hot surfaces to prevent pawburn and never leave your pet in a hot car, even for a few minutes.

1. [Warm weather worries – protect pets from heatstroke](#) – RSPCA

2. [Heatstroke in cats and dogs](#) – RSPCA Pet Insurance

3. A Puppy's Nose – petwave



Over the longer term, keep their weight within reasonable limits and clip their coat if it's unsuitable to your climate. And of course, avoid exercising them in the middle of the day, when the sun is at its hottest<sup>4</sup> or during humid weather.

## Sunburn

Cats and dogs can't slip on a shirt or slap on a hat, but it's not a bad idea to slop on some sunscreen if you're planning to take them outside. Dogs with smooth, white coats and non-pigmented skin are particularly vulnerable to sunburn, as are dogs that have been shaved to keep them cool. But even a dog with a thick, dark coat can get sunburned on their nose, on their abdomen, and around their mouth, eyelids and ears.<sup>5</sup>

As with heat stress, it's best to keep your pet in the shade at times when UV radiation is at its peak. If exposure is unavoidable, pet sunscreen offers good protection. And if things go wrong and your pet does get sunburned, Aloe Vera and Vitamin E creams can be soothing remedies, just as they are for us.<sup>6</sup>

## Yeast Infections

Pets, like humans, can get yeast infections such as candida, also known as thrush, which flourish in humid conditions. These fungi normally live in low numbers in the animal's digestive or genital tract on skin surface and in ear canals. But if conditions are right they will break out and create infections in the mouth, ear canal, between the toes and around the anus.

Dogs with floppy ears are at high risk,<sup>7</sup> and if your dog starts shaking or scratching its ears it's worth checking to see what's causing the itch. Another sign is a sour, fermenting smell and a cheesy, whitish discharge. These signs indicate the need for veterinary attention to avoid serious infection.

Treatment can start with anti-fungal creams, but it's recommended you consult with your vet before you pursue a course of treatment. Applying ear cleaning products or medications not prescribed by a vet can be dangerous to your dog or cat.

## Fleas

Flea bites irritate your pet's skin and can even cause more severe conditions. When a flea bites an animal, it deposits a small amount of saliva, which can set off Flea Allergy Dermatitis. This will cause excruciating itchiness and your pet may respond with frantic scratching and biting around the tail, groin and rump,<sup>8</sup> causing a secondary bacterial infection that requires treatment by a vet.

If fleas suck too much blood, your pet can develop anaemia.<sup>9</sup> This shows up as pale gums, weakness and lethargy. And if a pet ingests a flea that is infected with tapeworm, adult tapeworms can grow inside the anal tract, causing intense itching.

The best way to prevent fleas – and spot them on your pet – is with regular grooming. You should be able to spot them as tiny, dark-brown insects that are only about 1-2mm in length. If

<sup>4.</sup> [Heat Stress](#) – RSPCA New South Wales

<sup>5.</sup> [Sunburn and Your Dog](#) – VetWest

<sup>6.</sup> [What Should You Do If Your Dog Gets A Sunburn](#) – Petguide.com

<sup>7.</sup> [How to Diagnose, Prevent, and Treat Yeast Infections in Dogs](#) – CertaPet

<sup>8.</sup> [Flea Treatment for Dogs and Cats](#) – Advantage Pet Care

<sup>9.</sup> [Flea and tick prevention](#) – RSPCA Victoria

you can't see any fleas but still suspect your pet has them, placing a wet tissue on 'flea dirt' (flea faeces) which will turn red due to dried blood. Reddening of skin, loss of fur or obvious spots can indicate fleas.

A preventative flea product – whether it's a tablet, oral chew or spot-on applied to the skin – can be used on your pet on an ongoing basis throughout the year. Speak to your vet about which product may be best for your animal according to their age and weight. Remember that for this type of flea treatment to be effective, all pets in the house must use it.

Flea collars and rinses do treat the issue on your animal, but for complete flea control you need to treat the environment. As fleas can survive for several months without being attached to an animal, proper cleaning around the house should be common. This includes not only vacuuming furniture and areas your pet comes into contact with, but also washing pet bedding weekly (and at a high temperature), and spraying outdoor kennels or enclosures with adult flea killer every week until the infestation has abated.<sup>10</sup>

## Ticks

Paralysis Ticks live in Eastern Australia and usually attach themselves to native animals such as possums and bandicoots. Pets can pick up ticks when they play

in the bush or long grass, so camping holidays can be particularly risky.

The tick injects a poison into your pet as it feeds, causing weakness, wobbliness, irritation, heavy panting, a change in their bark or meow. This can be followed by paralysis and eventually death, especially in smaller and older animals.

To protect your pet, always check them over carefully if they have been outside, combing through their hair and feeling for any unusual bumps or sores.

### TIP

When checking your pet for ticks, be particularly vigilant searching between the toes, in and behind the ears, in the folds of the neck and underneath the collar.

<sup>10</sup>. [How do I stop my pets from getting fleas?](#) – RSPCA Australia Knowledgebase



It's also wise to employ preventative tick products for ongoing use throughout the year. Typically you will be able to purchase preventative treatments that include protection against ticks as well as fleas. Your pet can take these treatments orally or as a spot-on liquid. Speak to your vet about the best product for your animal depending on their age and weight.

## Mosquitos

Mosquitos love hot weather and breed rapidly in both natural waterways and any artificial pools around your house, including birdbaths and buckets left out in the rain. For us, mosquitos are barbecue-spoilers at worst, but for your pet, a mosquito bite is much more than a nuisance. It can transmit heartworm, a parasite that feeds on the blood in animals' lungs and heart.

Heartworm offspring are called "microfiliae". When a mosquito feeds on an infected animal, it can suck up these tiny larvae and inject them into the next animal it bites. In extreme cases, a single animal can become host to 200 adult heartworms, each of which can grow to 30cm long and 2cm thick.<sup>11</sup>

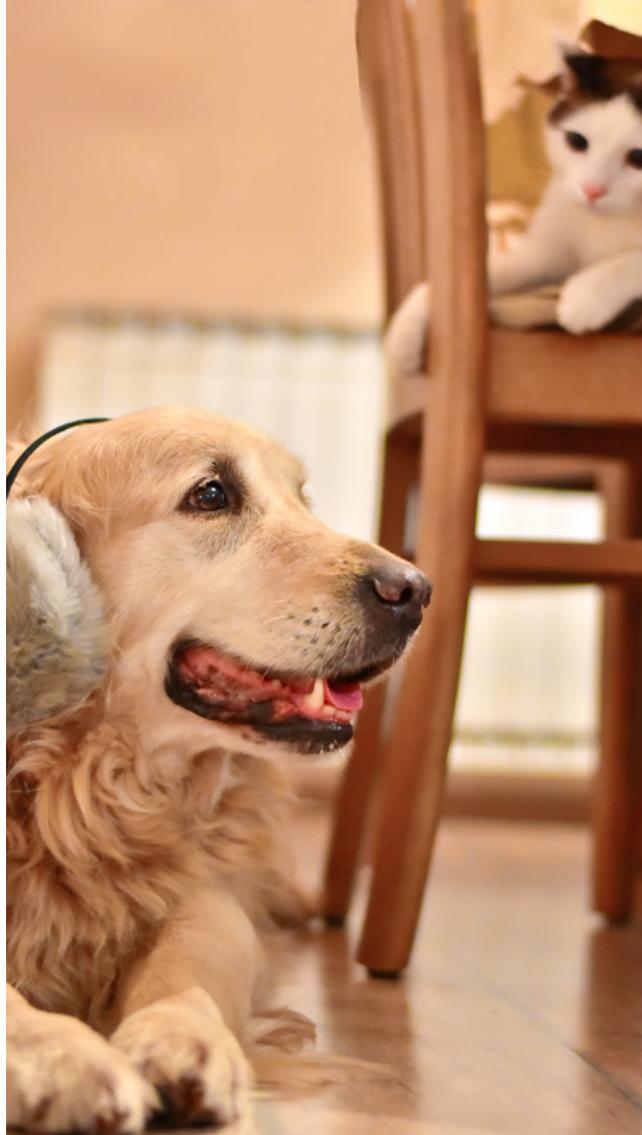
Signs that your pet has a heartworm include a persistent cough, dry coat, weight loss, listlessness and lack of stamina when exercising.<sup>12</sup> The best treatment is prevention, with options including chewables, spot-on-the-neck medications, and once-a-year injections.

## Christmas

The festive season brings with it much mirth and cheer, but also added risk for furry friends. While it's normal for humans to overindulge over Christmas, the same can be deadly for pets.

Chocolate is a major risk, as is other fatty and toxic (to dogs and cats) food. At family barbecues, don't leave animals unsupervised as they may get into fatty meats or potentially ingest kebab skewers.

Finally, Christmas decorations may be normal for humans but they are new things to inspect



for inquisitive animals. Keep tinsel, baubles and decorations that may be a danger to pets (such as displays with pins) out of reach of animals.<sup>13</sup>

## Fireworks and thunderstorms

Both of these things can terrify animals, so it's important to be aware of any adverse weather or impending fireworks display close to home. Always keep your animal's collar on, along with identification and your contact details. If possible, keep them contained indoors – a garage or laundry works well for outdoor animals – cover any windows in the room to prevent further flashing light from frightening them.

You can prepare for thunderstorms or fireworks by training them in the lead-up to feel safe in their 'safe area' by giving them treats and positive reinforcement.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11.</sup> [Heartworm Disease](#) – VetWest

<sup>12.</sup> [7 signs your dog has heartworm: diagnosis and prevention](#) – DOGSIfLife

<sup>13.</sup> [Pet owner's guide to surviving the festive season](#) – ABC News

<sup>14.</sup> [Fireworks and thunderstorms](#) – RSPCA Victoria

## Holidays

When travelling with your dog it's important to be aware of some basic tips that can make the journey a whole lot easier for you and them. Pack regular food and treats, and bring along their bed or crate for comfort. Make sure there's lots of water handy and ensure they are properly restrained into the car to minimise movement and chance of harm in the event of an accident.

Most importantly, never leave a dog unattended in your car. Even in mild weather they can die very quickly due to heat stress.<sup>15</sup>

## Boarding

Leaving your pet behind while you are on holiday is common because it's usually not feasible to bring your dog or cat along. Whether that's because the hotel doesn't allow pets, the distance is too far to travel in a car, or you're visiting family and friends with other animals who may not be friendly.

You can leave your pet with a trusted neighbour or house sitter, or hire someone from a reputable agency to visit your pet throughout the week to take care of things. Alternatively, it's popular these

days to board pets at kennels or 'pet hotels'.

Whatever the decision, always make sure your pet is microchipped and their vaccinations are up to date before leaving on your holiday.<sup>16</sup>

## Swimming

Some dogs love to swim, some don't. Before you take your pet into the water, make sure you're across a few pet-swimming safety rules.

It's best to go into the water with your dog the first time, as you can reassure them and encourage them towards you. If they aren't confident swimmers, there are dog-friendly lifejackets you can pick up.

If heading into the pool, brush your dog first and encourage them to relieve themselves beforehand. Afterwards, rinse them to get rid of any chlorine or salt.

If going to the beach, make sure your dog is already a confident swimmer and be aware of any other dogs that may be nearby, as well as distractions that may catch their attention further out at sea.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> [What do I need to know about taking my dog on a road trip with my family?](#) – RSPCA Australia Knowledgebase

<sup>16</sup> [Is it a good idea to take my cat with me when I go on holiday?](#) – RSPCA Australia Knowledgebase

<sup>17</sup> [How to keep your dog safe while swimming.](#) – RACV Living Well



# Pet Safety Tips for Autumn

The searing heat of summer has passed, so it can be tempting to relax your guard. But even this mellow season has a few risks to consider.

## Exercise

Don't cut back on exercise just because the days are getting shorter. Your dog needs that walk as much as you do, so stick to your routine. If you find yourself walking along busy roads in the dark, it may be worth investing in high-visibility jackets for you both.

## Mould allergies

If you live in an area where lots of deciduous trees have been planted, you're sure to enjoy the red and gold display that marks the turn of the year. Your pet probably loves rolling in the drifts of fallen leaves too, but these damp, decaying piles are a perfect home for moulds that can cause allergic reactions.

## Easter

Just like Christmas, Easter brings with it its own set of risks to pets, namely chocolate. Chocolate is highly toxic to dogs and cats even in small doses, so be sure to keep all Easter eggs and other chocolate treats well out of reach of your pet.

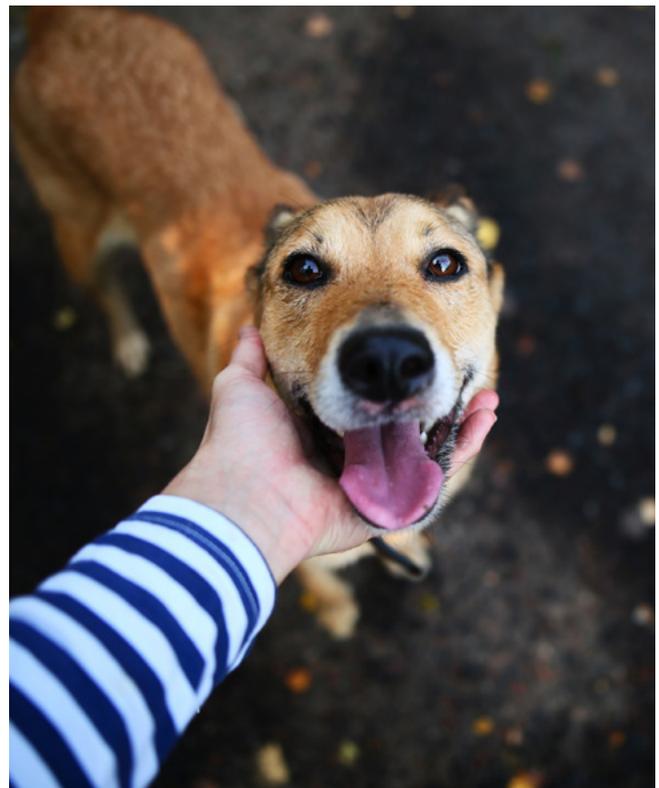
Other foods that are toxic to your pet include grapes (raisins in hot-cross buns), onions, garlic, leeks and caffeine and alcoholic beverages. Signs of toxicity include vomiting, diarrhoea, rapid breathing and seizures, so if your pet shows any of those signs be sure to take them to a vet immediately.

Also beware of any Easter decorations that could be a choking hazard if your furry friend decides to taste-test the shiny new things.<sup>19</sup>

**Watch for the signs of allergic dermatitis, such as inflamed patches on the skin and unusual scratching or gnawing.<sup>18</sup>**

Some preventatives include:

- ✓ Bathing your dog regularly to wash the allergens from their skin, using shampoo designed for sensitive or inflamed skin.
- ✓ Wash their paws whenever they come inside the house to reduce the spread of allergens.
- ✓ Regularly vacuuming and cleaning your home using natural cleaning products.
- ✓ Ensure your dog is eating a natural, well-balanced diet to keep their immune system functioning at a high level.



<sup>18</sup>. [Allergies in Dogs: Symptoms and Treatments](#) – Australian DOG Lover  
<sup>19</sup>. [Keep your dogs safe this Easter](#) – Australian DOG lover

# Pet Safety Tips for Winter



Winter is mild in most parts of Australia, but even the warmer latitudes have their unexpectedly cold periods. Run a check on your home and your habits to ensure you're creating the right environment for a happy, healthy pet.

## Hypothermia

In colder climates, the winter months hold special hazards for dogs and cats. Severe cold from snow or frost can induce hypothermia, in which your pet's temperature drops so low that they won't be able to bring it back up again with their normal mechanisms. Signs include uncontrollable shivering, weakness and lethargy, decreased heart rate and dilated pupils.<sup>20</sup>

Most pets are unlikely to be exposed to such an environment for long in a normal day, but take care not to let your dog or cat get locked outside by accident. Small, smooth-haired dogs, and those that normally live indoors and don't build up a winter coat, are particularly vulnerable if they are suddenly exposed to unusual cold. Luckily, there are now well-made jackets in every size to protect your dog on those wintry days.

## Dehydration

An unexpected hazard in winter is dehydration. If your pet's water bowl is outside and the temperature drops, they may be unable or unwilling to drink from it and go thirsty instead. If your dog or cat is dehydrated, they will pant heavily, lose their appetite and become listless. In this case their nose and gums will be dry and their eyes will look sunken. When you're patting your pet, you may notice that their skin has lost its elasticity.<sup>21</sup>

Most pets are unlikely to be exposed to such an environment for long in a normal day, but take care not to let your dog or cat get locked outside by accident.

<sup>20</sup> [Hypothermia in Dogs: Symptoms, Causes and Treatments](#) - dogtime.com  
<sup>21</sup> [Hypothermia in Dogs: Symptoms, Causes and Treatments](#) - dogtime.com

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## Arthritis

Older cats and dogs are prone to arthritis, just like humans, and cold weather can make the pain worse. Provide extra bedding to keep them warm and cushion those creaky joints. A heating pad can keep your pet comfortable while they're sleeping and make it easier to get moving when they wake up.

In addition to providing comfort and support, it's important to seek veterinary advice as many pets with arthritis need special treatments to relieve their symptoms. Without this, they will likely suffer unnecessary pain.

## Over-heating

It's nice to be curled up cosy and warm indoors, but some pets – particularly cats – can have too much of a good thing. Getting too close to the fire or heater, or staying there too long, can put your pets at risk of hyperthermia, over-heating and at risk of burns. This is especially true for older pets that have greater difficulty regulating their body temperature,<sup>22</sup> so it's important to supervise your pets when they are warming themselves near heaters or open fires.

**Cats are known to seek out cosy spots outdoors, even climbing into car engines to keep warm. Even if you don't have a cat, but your neighbours do, it's wise to check under the bonnet or even bang on the car to warn off any stowaway cats before you turn on the ignition.**



## Anti-freeze

Anti-freeze should typically be stored somewhere secure like a garage or tool shed, however the liquid commonly drips from car radiators, so if your animal frequents the garage they could be at risk. If your pet gets into the liquid it can cause fatal kidney problems.

Anti-freeze poisoning in dogs is very common in small breeds that can get under cars, however every dog is susceptible. Symptoms include 'drunken' behaviour, wobbly movements, vomiting, diarrhoea and excessive urination.<sup>23</sup>

In cats, anti-freeze is just as poisonous. Watch out for stumbling, vomiting and excessive drooling. In all instances, contact your vet or pet poison helpline immediately for treatment.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup>. [14 Changes Dogs Go Through As They Age That All Pet Owner's Should Know About](#) - Bustle

<sup>23</sup>. [Antifreeze poisoning in dogs](#) - PetMD

<sup>24</sup>. [Antifreeze poisoning in cats](#) - PetMD

# Pet Safety Tips for Spring

After the winter ills and chills, it's tempting to rush headlong into the soft days of spring. But discomfort and even real danger lurk in some places you might not expect.

## Allergies

Like you, cats and dogs can suffer from environmental allergies, and spring is peak season for pollens and grasses. Some pets react with red eyes and runny noses, so pay attention if your pet starts sneezing.

Far more common are skin irritations from allergic dermatitis, which usually show up on their feet or the hairless areas of their bellies. Watch out for inflamed areas and unusual rashes and monitor how much your pet scratches itself so you'll notice if something changes.<sup>25</sup> Their behaviour is trying to tell you something.



## Snakes

Snakes come out of hibernation as the weather warms up, so if you live in a snake-prone area now may be the time to take precautions. Cut long grass in the backyard and get rid of any rubbish, such as left over timber or garden refuse, which could become a lair for a snake.

Chat to your neighbours too, and lobby your local council to clean up danger spots in parks and empty blocks. When you walk your dog, keep it on a leash unless you're sure the area is safe. If your pet goes exploring and starts barking at a wood pile, it might be worth calling in an expert.

**There are several signs of snake bite, and it's important to know them so you can help your pet in the event of an attack. Some of the common signs are:<sup>26</sup>**

- ✓ Sudden weakness followed by collapse.
- ✓ Shaking or twitching muscles and difficulty blinking.
- ✓ Vomiting.
- ✓ Loss of bladder and bowel control.
- ✓ Dilated pupils.
- ✓ Paralysis.
- ✓ Blood in urine.

If your pet has been bitten, it's important to stay calm and go straight to your vet – but be sure to call first to ensure they have the anti-venom. If not, they should be able to direct you to a facility that does have it on hand.

<sup>25</sup> [Flea and tick prevention](#) – RSPCA Victoria

<sup>26</sup> [My pet has been bitten by a snake, what should I do?](#) – RSPCA Australia Knowledgebase

## Grass seeds

It might sound surprising, but issues related to grass seeds are very common in pets, especially for dogs that spend a lot of time outdoors, and even more so during the spring and summer months.

An embedded grass seed can pop up anywhere, but often under the skin of your pet's paws, around the head and neck, and in the eyes, nose and mouth. Often the seeds are snorted up and then they migrate elsewhere around the body.

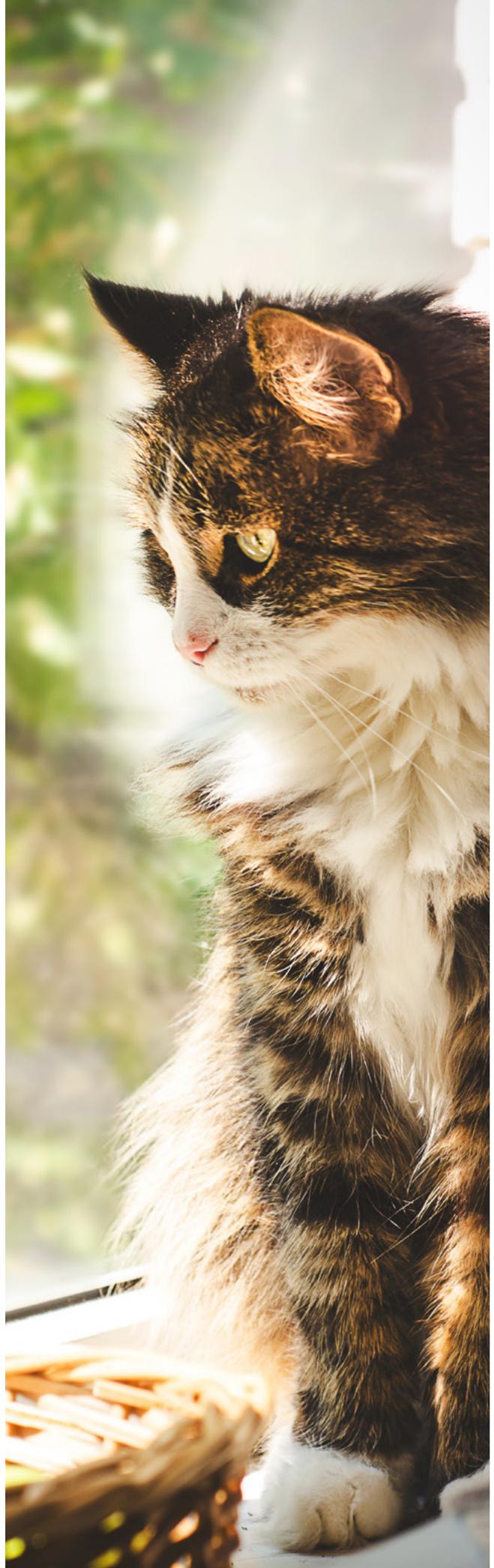
A range of problems can arise from grass seeds, including everything from general pain and swelling to pneumonia, spinal cord disease and bladder infections.

Prevention is always better than cure. So even though most grass seeds can be removed with a minor surgical procedure, you can prevent them from affecting your pet by grooming them weekly and, for long-haired dogs, keeping their fur clipped to a manageable level.<sup>27</sup>

## Garden risks

Many dogs are either indoor-outdoor or strictly outdoor dogs, which means they will spend a lot of time in and around your garden. However, there are some big risks lingering in the garden that you should be aware of.

Any type of fertiliser and bait (snail, slug, rat) can be toxic to dogs and cats. There are also poisonous plants like many types of lily. Fruit trees that drop their fruit may have stones that can get lodged in your pet's throat, while garden mulch often includes a by-product of cocoa powder or other chocolate products, which can be toxic to your pet.<sup>28</sup>



<sup>27</sup> [Dangers of grass seeds for dogs](#) - Australian DOG lover

<sup>28</sup> [What garden dangers must I protect my pet from?](#) - RSPCA Australia Knowledgebase

# Pet Safety Checklist



Here are our top 10 tips for pet safety. Take a good look at the environment you're providing, and make sure it's set up for minimum hazard and maximum health.

- Are you providing healthy food in appropriate amounts at the right time of day?
- Do you change the drinking water every day and wash the bowl regularly so your pet has fresh, clean water available at all times?
- Does your pet have adequate shelter – a space out of the rain with shade in summer and protection from draughts in winter?
- Is their bedding clean and comfortable, so it is free of fleas and mould?
- If your pet is a "senior", is their sleeping place warm and soft enough to ease the pain of arthritis?
- Have you given your pet the right medications to prevent fleas, ticks, tapeworm and heartworm taking hold?
- If your pet plays in an area where ticks are a hazard, do you carefully check them every time they go out?
- Do you keep an eye on your pet's skin so you notice immediately any inflammation or itchiness, which could be a sign of an allergic reaction?
- Do you know your pet well enough to notice any behaviour changes, such as increased scratching, worrying and biting?
- Would you recognise if your pet was over-heated or suffering from hypothermia

Our pets are dependent on us in almost every way, and loving pet owners take great care to keep them safe and happy. But no matter how vigilant you are, things can go wrong, and that's when you need the expert assistance of a veterinarian.

Unfortunately, there's never a good time for expensive surprises, and RSPCA Pet Insurance is designed to protect you in the bad times.

Covering a wide range of events, RSPCA Pet Insurance is the investment that gives you peace of mind. When your pet looks to you for help, you'll know you can give them the long and comfortable life they deserve.

**You can get a quote [here](#).**

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