

# Is It Too Cold For My Dog?

by Magnum the Doberman  
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We have discussed in previous months that exercise, the mental stimulation of being outdoors, and play are key to keeping dogs not only happy, but healthy. But what should you do when it's cold outside? When do the risks of spending time in the cold outweigh the benefits of being outdoors? There are dangers for your pet associated with winter weather but you can still safely enjoy the great outdoors with your dog during wintertime.

First, remember, that all dogs aren't created equal. An outdoor temperature that feels comfortable to one dog might send another in search of shelter. Here are some variables that affect that:

**Coat type** – Dogs with thick, double-layered coats tend to be the most cold-tolerant (Malamutes, Huskies, Newfoundlands, Samoyeds). In most cases, these breeds have been developed in Northern climates and may also have other anatomical, physiological or behavioral attributes that allow them to thrive when it's frigid. On the other hand, dogs who have exceptionally thin coats (e.g., Greyhounds, Dobermans, Boxers, Chihuahuas) suffer the most in cold weather.

**Coat color** – On a clear, sunny day, dogs with black, brown, or other dark fur can absorb significant amounts of heat from sunlight, keeping them warmer in comparison to their light-coated brethren.

**Size** – Small dogs have a larger surface area to volume ratio. Meaning, the smaller dogs are the more skin they have - in relation to their "insides" - through which to lose heat. Therefore, small dogs get colder more easily than do large dogs.

**Weight** – Body fat is a good insulator. Thinner dogs tend to get colder quicker than do their heftier counterparts. That said, the health risks of being overweight far outweigh any benefits, so don't fatten up your dogs during the winter months in a misguided attempt to protect them from the cold.

**Conditioning** – You've experienced this one. Fifty degrees feels quite chilly in October, but after a long, cold winter, a fifty-degree day in April can make humans break out the shorts and t-shirts. Dogs who are used to cold temperatures handle them much better than pets who aren't.

**Age and Health** – The very young, the very old, and the sick are not as able to regulate their body temperatures in comparison to healthy dogs in the prime of their lives, and they, therefore, need greater protection from the cold.

Just as dogs are not all created equal, all temperatures aren't all created equal either.

The temperature as it registers on a thermometer isn't the only environmental factor that affects how dogs feel the cold. It's pretty much the same for dogs as it is for humans.

**Wind chiLL** – A brisk breeze can quickly cut through a dog's coat and greatly decreases its ability to insulate and protect against cold temperatures.

**Dampness** – Rain, wet snow, heavy fog, going for a swim ... any form of dampness that soaks through the fur can quickly chill a dog even if the air temperature is not all that cold.

**Cloud cover** – Cloudy days tend to feel colder than do sunny days since dogs can't soak up the sun and warm themselves.

**Activity** – If dogs are going to be very active while outside, they may generate enough extra body heat to keep them comfortable even if the temperature is quite low.

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**COLD WEATHER GUIDELINES** There are some basic cold temperature guidelines for dogs. In general, temperatures should not become a problem for most dogs until they fall below 45° F, at which point some cold-averse dogs might begin to feel uncomfortable. When temperatures fall below 32° F, owners of small breed dogs, dogs with thin coats, and/or very young, old or sick dogs should pay close attention to their pet's well-being. Once temperatures drop under 20° F, all owners need to be aware that their dogs could potentially develop cold-associated health problems like hypothermia and frostbite.

The best way to monitor dogs when it's cold is to keep a close eye on their behavior. If you notice your dog shivering, acting anxious, whining, slowing down, searching out warm locations or holding up one or more paws, it's time to head inside.

There are cold weather clothing items available for dogs including sweaters/coats and even boots. My mom doesn't put clothing on me and my sister Bella. She measures how the current temperature will affect us, by how it affects her. If she is cold outside, we probably are too. If it's warm enough for her to take a walk, we are probably fine walking also. However, when the weather has been such that the roadways have been treated with salt, there is a new danger for your dog.

Road salt is a mixture of sodium chloride and grit that can "irritate a dog's skin, causing dryness, cracking and even burns in dog pads." The most dangerous thing about road salt for dogs is, if they get it on their paws or their fur, they can ingest chemicals that can be toxic. Dogs lick. They will especially lick their feet if they are irritated. Ingesting road salt can lead to drooling, vomiting, diarrhea, and loss of appetite. In severe cases, dogs can develop seizures, and in the most severe cases, they can be fatal. Even a small amount of pure salt can be very dangerous for pets. Ingestion can lead to a high concentration of sodium in the blood which can cause thirst, vomiting, lethargy, and in some cases, there is a risk of convulsions and kidney damage.

If you walk your dog in the winter, and I encourage you to do so if the weather is tolerable at all, you need to clean your pet's feet after coming home. What my mom likes to do is have a shallow container filled with warm water, and a towel, right inside the door where we enter the house. She dips each foot in the water, swishing it around, and then dries them off. We still may lick our feet, but most of the road salt has been rinsed off at that point.

Last but not least, it really BITES me (pun intended), to hear people say, "It's okay, they have fur." Or, "It's not a big deal, they are just a dog." If that is your highest regard for your pet, then you really should not have one. If you're cold, we're cold. Simple as that.

But guess what else? In Illinois, it is against the law to leave pets outside in extreme temperatures. Hot or cold. If a pet is hurt or dies as a result of being left in extreme weather, a pet owner can be charged with a Class A misdemeanor punishable by up to a \$2,500 fine or up to one year in jail if they are found guilty. So there!

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