

# Please, Do Not Ignore These Telltale Signs of Hypothermia

Winter is here with a vengeance — which always raises the question of how cold is too cold for your pet. Here are the rules of the road — which vary by breed and circumstance. Plus the signs you'd be wise to pay heed to, so your pet doesn't slip into hypothermia and frostbite.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The winter freeze is upon us, and dog parents in many parts of the U.S. are wondering how cold is too cold to have their pet outside
- How well your dog withstands freezing temps depends on several factors, including her size, weight, age, health and coat
- It also depends on things like whether it's overcast, snowing or raining, and the wind chill factor
- Whenever you're outside with your dog in the winter, it's important to stay alert for signs he's cold and needs to go indoors
- It's also important to provide small dogs, those with short or thin coats, older dogs and pets with mobility problems or chronic health conditions with sweaters and outdoor coats

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With the frigid temperatures some areas of the country are getting this winter, many dog parents are asking a common sense question: "When is it just too cold to have my dog outside?"

A good rule of thumb to follow: When the temperature drops below 45 degrees F, dogs who generally don't love the cold start to feel uncomfortable. Below 32 degrees F, small breeds, thin-coated dogs, and old, young and sick dogs should be very carefully monitored for signs of discomfort. Below 20 degrees F, hypothermia and frostbite are a risk for all dogs.

## 6 Questions to Ask Yourself to Gauge How Well Your Dog Might Handle Very Cold Weather

Generally speaking, some types of dogs do better with freezing temps than others. Some things to consider:

- **How big is your dog?** "Small dogs have a larger surface area to volume ratio," writes Dr. Jennifer Coates for PetMD. "In other words, 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 readily than do large dogs ... all other things being equal."<sup>1</sup>

- **How much does she weigh?** Just as with thin people, thin dogs get the shivers much faster than dogs with more insulating body fat.
- **How old is your dog?** Puppies and senior and geriatric dogs can't regulate their body temperature as efficiently as healthy adult dogs, so they get much colder, much faster.
- **How is her health? Dogs with mobility issues** or a chronic disease will be at much greater risk for hypothermia in cold weather than healthy dogs.
- **What type of coat does your dog have?** Double-coated dogs, especially northern breeds like **Siberian Huskies** and **Samoyeds**, tend to do much better in frigid temps than other breeds. For dogs with thin coats like the **Greyhound**, the opposite is true.
- **What color is her coat?** Dogs with dark-colored coats absorb lots of heat from the sunlight, so on a bright clear winter day, they will be significantly warmer than their light-coated counterparts.

With all that said, it's important to remember that dogs are individuals, and while yours might meet most or all the criteria for a good "cold weather dog," it's important to stay alert for signs she needs to be taken indoors. These include:

- Shivering
- Holding up a paw
- **Anxiety**.
- Searching for warmth
- Whining
- Weakness
- Slowing down
- Lack of mental alertness

## **Additional Factors That Will Effect How Well Your Dog Handles the Cold**

- **Is it cloudy out or sunny?** Overcast days feel colder than sunny days, and in addition, there's no opportunity for dark-coated dogs to absorb sunshine to help them stay warm.
- **Is it raining or snowing?** Any sort of dampness that saturates your dog's coat can quickly drop his body temperature even when it's not terribly cold out.
- **Is there a wind chill?** Windy days can make the temperature feel much colder than the reading on the thermostat. In addition, breezy conditions inhibit the ability of your dog's coat to insulate and protect him from the cold.
- **Will your dog be exercising while he's outdoors?** Your dog's activity level makes a big difference in how quickly he gets cold. Obviously, if he's exercising or playing vigorously, he's generating a good deal of body heat that will protect him from getting cold quickly.

## How to Know if Your Dog Needs a Sweater in Cold Weather

One sign that your dog is feeling chilly is a hesitance to go outside to potty. And if she insists on lying on you or in contact with you at bedtime, it's another sign she's looking for warmth. And of course shivering is always a red flag. If your dog is sending "I'm cold" signals, is a small or toy breed, has a short or thin coat, is older and perhaps doesn't get around well, or has a chronic health condition, a sweater or jacket may be the best thing for her, including indoors.

Dogs that aren't likely to need sweaters are large breeds with dense coats. In fact, most dogs bred for cold climates can actually overheat in a sweater or jacket. Overweight dogs often don't need extra insulation, either. But breeds like the Chihuahua, many of the terrier and pinscher breeds and the Greyhound, are examples of dogs that often need a little help staying warm.

When picking a sweater for your dog, choose a fabric that can be easily washed and dried, and one that won't itch or irritate your pet's skin. You'll want to measure the circumference of your dog's neck and chest, and the length of his body from neck to waist, plus take his weight, so that you can select clothing that fits.

A dog sweater should be snug, but not tight. The length should end at about the waist, leaving the dog's back end free. The neck and leg holes should be big enough that your dog can move freely, but not so big that he can pull his head or a leg out.

Opt for plain sweaters without zippers, hooks, buttons or other adornments that can be both annoying to your dog and a choking hazard. The sweater should be easy to put on and take off without a struggle. Look for sweaters made of natural material as well, like this organic, recycled 100% cotton sweater.



You may have a few misses before you hit on the right size and fit, so either take your dog with you so you can try things on him, or shop at retailers with liberal return policies.

### Additional Tips

If you put a sweater on your dog, especially indoors, make sure to check regularly to insure she's comfortable. Take sweaters on and off every few hours to prevent overheating or an itchy rash. And keep in mind that not every dog who needs a coat will wear one — it's just too unnatural for some. So don't force your dog to wear any item of clothing if it means she can't act or move naturally.

And one more thing ... dogs rarely, if ever, need pants. And boots are also unnecessary in most instances, especially since dogs feel the ground with their paws, and anything that interferes with their ability to perceive their environment isn't a great idea. However, if you live in a heavily contaminated environment or walk on ice, training your dog to wear boots may be a necessity, but one your dog won't be happy about.

## Sources and References

<sup>1</sup> [PetMD, January 2, 2024](#)

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