

Keeping our Canberra pets warm this winter

If you feel cold, chances are your pet does too.

The good news? You don't have to break the bank to keep your pet snug and warm – whether you have a dog, a cat or a pocket pet....here are some tips for how to make them more comfortable in their environment day and night.

Let me start by saying - don't think that your pet needs to be shivering to be feeling cold. I think it's a myth to think that because dogs and cats are covered in fur that it means they do not feel the cold. Sure, coat lengths and thickness varies across breeds of dogs and cats, but all animals are susceptible to feeling the cold to varying degrees.

-It can be hard to judge whether your particular pet feels the cold and to what degree, but as a starting point, let's talk about some tips for our cats and dogs living conditions and see if there are some points that hit home for you in your home.

Kitty warmth

Utilise the sun – open blinds and curtains to maximise sun exposure to let your cat soak up the sun for natural warmth. Have suitable raised beds in the best sunny spots in the house. This can be harder to remember than you think! With our shortened daylight hours, this often requires remembering to open the blinds or curtains before you leave for work and if you are anything like me, this is often in the dark at this time of year.



Warm raised beds – pay attention to the type of beds your cat likes – do they like to curl up in a cat igloo, like to be burrow under a blanket, or prefer to stretch out? You can get pet safe heated beds for cats – the safest types reduce back to room temperature when the cat is not on it. Ensure beds are raised off the floor, but for older cats, remember to take into account arthritis and whether your cat can easily jump to a high bed. Provide 'stepping stones' to higher beds if needed. You can even get window mounted beds that simply attach with a few suction caps. They are fantastic to utilise a sunny spot.



Resolve drafts around the house where possible, especially around windows where your cat may preferentially go

Exercise is always good – interact with your cat daily. Its beneficial for their mental and physical health (plus it's just fun!)

Don't put your cat in a cold garage or basement because they can be ice boxes in winter. This goes for litter boxes as well. Cats that have uncomfortable toileting areas where they feel cold and uncomfortable are more likely to toilet in areas they don't have to be

cold – this may be in areas where there is no litter box.

Heating - When we leave the house and turn off the central heating, perhaps you could consider (if it's safe), to have central heating on low, just to take the chill off the air for our cats (or indoor dogs).

What about outdoor cats?

I certainly don't advocate any cat to be outside at night, ever, any time of year. But if you do have a totally outdoor cat, or even if your cat is allowed out during the day for a few hours, it's essential we consider ways we can ensure they are protected from the elements.

Don't think that because a cat willingly goes outside, that it means it doesn't feel the cold!

The other scenario is if you have any stray cats around that need some love and care. It can be inexpensive with some general know how, to make a warm shelter for such cats who otherwise have no one to care for them.

Cats that go outside should have adequate shelter from the elements. Shelters can be purchased or built quite cheaply. The main principle is to ensure the shelter is raised off the ground, both for warmth as well as helping cats to feel safe. They should be insulated, water proof and despite what you may think, they should be relatively small – so that it can trap body heat.

Remember that bedding will more than likely get wet to some degree so it needs to be changed regularly. Straw can be used or pillowcases loosely stuffed with shredded paper.

Cats are small! Therefore despite whether they have a thick coat or not, they should always be protected from the cold as they lose body heat easily. All cats should be inside at night – not only to protect them from the chill, but to protect them from the dangers of cars, dogs and roaming cats.



Doggy warmth

Winter has certainly hit in Canberra and its important to keep our dogs warm to ensure their comfort and good health. As a general rule of thumb, just as we rug up in winter because we feel the cold, so do our dogs. So lets talk about some tips for keeping our dogs cosy this winter:

Know the requirements of your dog based on their breed – for example, do you have a husky or like my dog, a german shepherd? These dogs are quite hardy in the cold because they have a thick double coat. So their requirements for additional warmth are less than say breeds such as greyhounds, dobermans or any small or toy breeds. Having said that, it doesn't mean because you have a dog with a thick coat, that they don't need suitable shelter from frost, wind and rain or most of the other requirements we are going to talk about.



Provide adequate shelter – an outdoor dog shelter should be raised off the ground about 10-15cm to reduce rising cold from underneath. It should have a sloping roof that extends far enough beyond the entrance to prevent rain and frost from wetting it inside. Shelters should be positioned to maximise sun during the day, but minimise wind and rain which can be bitterly cold at this time of year. Shelters should be insulated and not have gaps where drafts can come through. They can be further insulated with blankets and a canopy over the top to make them waterproof. Ideally have your shelter under an existing roof for an added layer of security. The floor of the shelter should have soft, thick padding such as big cushions or a doggy mattress. On top of that, use blankets and bedding that can be easily washed and changed over when it gets dirty or wet. I put a hot water bottle wrapped in a pillowcase and blanket inside my dog's kennel in the morning before I go to work. I put it to one side so that if he prefers, he can lie away from it. The risk with hot water bottles is that young dogs may chew on it and burn themselves, so only use these if your dog is mature enough not to use it as a toy. There are heaters you can buy specifically for kennels, so jump on the internet and research what best suits your needs and the temperament of your dog. Additional heating is particularly important for older dogs who may suffer from arthritis.

Dog coats – there are so many types of dog coats and jumpers available for dogs these days to suit all environments, budgets and breeds. My recommendation for any dog that spends time outside is to ensure the coat is waterproof, but breathable on the outside, with insulating layers on the underside. Make sure you measure your dog from neck to tail base as well as the diameter around his chest and neck before you set off to buy them a coat. It's all too common for dogs to have great coats that are either too small, so they don't cover the length of their back, or too big where they can get into strife if a leg gets caught in a gaping area of the coat. If your dog spends significant amounts of time outside, consider getting a doggy jumper to put underneath his waterproof coat for additional insulation.

Keep your dog indoors at night - temperatures plummet at night, and being indoors, even if it is in the laundry reduces your dogs exposure to the elements. But remember, that when your dog is inside, it's still really important that they are raised off the ground about 10cm with either a raised bed with blankets on top or a thick cushion type bed. Always give them blankets to snuggle into (just as we love our doonas). A good, cheap option is a foam mattress cut to size for your dog. The benefit of foam is that it doesn't need to be frequently fluffed up like a lot of dog beds do. Be aware of drafts and take adequate steps to prevent them from chilling your dog. Pay particular attention under doors and around windows.

Keep your dog suitably groomed in winter – your dog's coat is its natural source of warmth, so for breeds requiring clipping, keep this in mind when deciding on length during winter. In general, keep a longer coat in the cold months. Ensure your dog is groomed well during winter because matted hair is less efficient at insulating, not to mention uncomfortable and even painful (I liken it to having your hair pulled and twisted – ouch!). I see many dogs with long matted coats in winter and owners often say “but it's too cold to clip him/her” - my answer is CLIP, but a longer length in cold weather.

Continue to exercise your pooch – just as we tend to be less active in winter, so are our dogs. I for one would often prefer to lie around on the couch on a cold evening after work than take my dog for a walk, but it's important to maintain fitness, so regular exercise never stops being important no matter what the thermostat says.

If your dog does spend a significant amount of time outside – feed them a little more as they will be burning more calories to stay warm. This is not a free ticket to let them get overweight!

Skin irritation in winter – while in winter there are less airborne allergens/pollens causing skin disease, unfortunately the drying effects of heating in our houses makes some dogs itchy. If your dog has doggy dandruff, consider getting them checked out by your vet as there are some great supplements and leave-in conditioners that can assist.

Pocket pets

Don't forget our little pets such as rabbits, guinea pigs, rats, mice and birds. These little creatures are even more prone to the cold due to their small body weight. Wind, rain and frost are easily fatal for these guys, so ensure they have suitable warm snuggly areas in your home. Drafts are absolute killers, so be aware of the environment they are housed in. Ensure cleanliness of bedding as they can catch diseases easily.