

CHRISTMAS SAFETY AND WINTER (Part Three) by Chaplain Jill Marie Chambers, C4C Canine Program Facilitator

Winter with its beautiful blanket of snow has another list of concerns, besides the obvious cold. Be mindful of short hair/fur dogs and senior dogs when it is cold and windy. Doggie coats can certainly help keep our dogs more comfortable. Many older dogs can have undiagnosed arthritis and keeping them warmer may help with the stiffness and pain they may feel. Winter air is dry, so be sure to keep plenty of fresh water on hand for your dogs. If your dog's foot pads are dry and cracked there is a big chance your dog is dehydrated. Consider switching to a moist food, and you can offer bone broth to encourage them to drink more. Dog pad balms may help but are only part of the solution.

A major concern in the winter is ice and ice melt products. Many dogs like to chew or eat ice, but it can be harmful to their teeth. Besides that, chemical runoff from roads can accumulate in the ice and be ingested. Ice melt is particularly dangerous to dogs. It can burn their pads or be licked off their feet and cause damage to the mouth as well as be ingested. ALL ice melts pose some kind of risk to your pet. Even the "pet safe" products are not really pet safe and can cause health issues. Pet-safe ice melts typically contain urea or magnesium chloride which are considered slightly safer but may still cause gastrointestinal upset such as vomiting or diarrhea. While some may be "safer" on the paws, they can be more dangerous if ingested. Even the so called "natural" rock salt that is so common is harmful. Ingestion can cause minor symptoms like gastrointestinal irritation to more severe ones, like high blood sodium levels. This can lead to several health problems such as neurologic dysfunction including seizures. Ethylene glycol-based ice melts contain the same active ingredient as antifreeze, which is deadly to pets. Some symptoms of ingestion can include:

Drooling (Nausea); Vomiting; Diarrhea; Abdominal pain; Bloating; Lethargy; Weakness; Unsteadiness; Behavioral changes; Muscle twitches; Seizures; Coma

How to protect your pet? There are many options. If you are able to carry your pet, you can carry them across parking lots. Have them walk in the snow rather than on the sidewalk. This will limit their exposure to ice melts. Be sure to rinse and wipe clean their feet after possible exposure to ice melts. Wipe in between toes and around all the foot pads.

Paw waxes such as Musher's Secret can help. Be sure to get in between the toes and deep in between all the pads and go up to the ankle. One caution on paw waxes, some dogs like the taste! So, once you bring your dog in be sure to wipe off the wax before they start licking their paws. The waxes themselves are not harmful (be sure to use one specifically made for dogs and be sure to read the label!) but the ice melt can stick to the wax and be tracked inside the home and licked off later. In fact, you can track ice melt into your home on your shoes, so be careful to clean it up so as not to tempt your dog to lick it off the floor.

One of the easiest ways to protect your dog is with the use of dog booties or rubber coated socks. There will be some training needed to help your dog adjust to wearing them. Be sure they fit properly. Show them to your dog before putting them on. Do not let him play with them as though they are a toy. Show him the booties and offer him a treat for ignoring them. This is a great time a "Leave it" command comes in handy. Start with just one bootie and if he goes for it tell him to leave it. Be sure to reward with a treat. Of course, this works only if the command has been taught. If not, you may reach out to me to learn how to teach this command. Any time he ignores the bootie be sure to praise and reward.

Then add another, and so on till all booties are on the dog. Alternatively (and this is how I taught Cookie) have your dog on a leash, put all the booties on and QUICKLY just go for a walk. Walk quickly and be animated to keep your dog's interest on you, giving lots of praise and treats. After a while the dog will forget they have them on. Cookie has learned to actually like her boots in cold weather as her feet stay warm on hikes. Some Tips: be sure to keep your dog's nails trimmed so the boots are more comfortable. Don't leave the boots on for long periods of time if it isn't cold, as your dog's feet may get too warm and start to sweat, the resulting wetness can cause them to feel too cold.

Have fun in the snow but be mindful of the conditions and play safe out there!