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Rising Temperatures Place Pets at Risk

Heat-Related Illnesses Most Common in Dogs as Summer Heat Arrives in Arizona

GILBERT, AZ – May 30, 2008 – The panting bulldog arrived at the veterinary hospital on his side, unable to rise to his feet after collapsing during a brief walk around the block late last April. His worried owners reported he was normal upon leaving their home less than 15 minutes earlier; the young dog had no previous history of serious illness. “Could it be his heart?” they asked. The veterinary technician who met them at the door reserved judgment as she rushed the critically ill pet into the hospital’s treatment area, but she knew Augie’s short snout and narrow nostrils, combined with his history of uncontrollable panting followed by weakness, vomiting, and collapse would add up to a different diagnosis: heat stroke.

Scenes like this play out in veterinary practices every year as spring turns to summer and well-meaning pet owners overlook precautions that can help limit their pets’ risk of heat-related illness and death. While Valley residents tend to associate the dangers of hot weather with the triple-digit highs of mid-summer, Dr. Billy Griswold, a veterinarian at Priority Pet Hospital in Gilbert, says that many cases of heat stroke occur during times when temperatures or humidity jump sharply. “We often see a spike in cases as spring turns rapidly to summer and again as the humidity level jumps at the start of the monsoon,” he reports. “Even well-conditioned and athletic dogs have a hard time acclimating to such rapid changes in weather.”

Griswold, who for five years worked as an emergency veterinarian before opening Priority Pet Hospital with Dr. Karin Burns in January, says that most cases of heat stroke result from tragic mistakes or oversights in basic care, such as letting an outdoor dog’s water bowl run dry; nearly all cases are preventable. Any pet can suffer from heat stroke, but dog breeds with short snouts, such as bulldogs, pugs, and boxers are particularly susceptible to heat related illnesses. Common signs of hyperthermia (excessive body temperature) include fatigue, vigorous panting, and a pet that appears “drunk,” or wobbly on its feet. Untreated, symptoms progress rapidly, and may include vomiting, thick stringy saliva or froth coming from the pet’s mouth, and collapse. Affected pets’ gums are often brick red, but may become pale or grayish—a sign of shock. If a pet’s body temperature is not lowered in time, permanent damage to the body’s proteins may result in brain damage, seizures, spontaneous bleeding, and other deadly consequences.

First aid for heat stroke begins with moving the pet to a shaded area with good air flow. Wet the fur with tap water or cover the pet with damp towels to begin evaporative cooling; never use ice or ice water, which can cause the body’s core to retain heat, and don’t try to force the pet to drink. Severe hyperthermia affects all systems of the body. Lowering the body temperature is critical, says Dr. Burns, “But it does not address the life-threatening complications that typically accompany this problem.”

It is crucial that pets suffering from hyperthermia are provided with veterinary care as quickly as possible. Even with the most aggressive care available, many dogs die as a result of heat stroke each year. In some cases, advanced treatments such as plasma transfusions are required to stem spontaneous bleeding that results from severe or prolonged hyperthermia. The cost of care in such cases can be several thousand dollars—with a poor prognosis for recovery and no guarantee of success—so heat stroke is best prevented.

In addition to using common sense techniques such as providing adequate water and shelter, Dr. Burns recommends helping your pet avoid exercise during the hottest hours of the day. “Misting systems and access to shallow plastic kiddie pools can help, too,” adds Dr. Griswold. However, they both agree that the best way to prevent hyperthermia is allowing access to the cool of your home during the heat of summer. “It is, after all, where family members belong,” says Dr. Burns.

As for Augie, his owner's rapid response and the skill of the emergency veterinary team resulted in a happy ending. After three days in the hospital, which included two transfusions of canine plasma, fourteen liters of intravenous fluids, IV antibiotics, and drugs to control an irregular heart rhythm caused by hyperthermia, he went home.

About Priority Pet Hospital: Serving Gilbert, Chandler, and Queen Creek, Priority Pet Hospital is a full-service veterinary practice providing preventive care and vaccines, spay/neuter services, general medicine, surgery, and dentistry for dogs and cats. Our low-stress approach to handling puts four-legged family members at ease. The team at Priority Pet Hospital has been caring for pets and the people who love them in since 2008.

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