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HYPOTHERMIA (FROSTBITE)

What is it? Hypothermia is defined as a body temperature below normal. The normal body temperature for a dog is about 99.5 degrees Fahrenheit and the normal body temperature for a cat is about 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit. Hypothermia occurs when an animal is unable to maintain a normal temperature after prolonged exposure to the cold.

What animals are affected? Both dogs and cats develop hypothermia. Pets that live outdoors are more prone to developing hypothermia if they lack adequate shelter.

What are the signs? Hypothermic patients often have a history of exposure to very cold outdoor temperatures or submersion in cold water. Early symptoms often include shivering, stiff gait, and lethargic behavior. As exposure continues, pets can become shocky and non-responsive, with dangerously low heart rate and fixed, dilated pupils.

How is it diagnosed? A diagnosis is made based on a history consistent with exposure to the cold, physical exam findings described above, and low rectal temperature.

How is it treated? Move your pet to a warm environment and wrap him or her in blankets. Slow warming is important. Warm pets slowly, as excessive heat can cause dilation of superficial blood vessels, resulting in shock. Blankets may be warmed by placing them in a clothes dryer. Hot water bottles may be wrapped in the blankets to add heat. Avoid heating pads or blankets as they can burn the skin. Seek veterinary care for severe cases of hypothermia (such as with a non-responsive pet) or when there has been prolonged exposure to the cold.

What after care is needed? Pets with severe hypothermia may require hospitalization for continued supportive care and rewarming.

What is the prognosis? The outcome for pets with hypothermia is variable. Otherwise healthy animals with mild to moderate hypothermia usually recover uneventfully. Pets with severe hypothermia or another underlying disease have a more guarded prognosis.

Can it be prevented? Hypothermia can be prevented by providing pets with a clean, dry, draft-free shelter from the elements.