

Cat Safety Tips for Wintertime

Ten tips for avoiding pet holiday hazards.

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With winter and the holidays approaching, special considerations should be taken when caring for pets. Although dogs and cats have fur coats, pets still depend on their human companions for protection during the colder months.

The San Francisco SPCA offers 11 tips to keep cats safe during the winter and holiday seasons.

1. Giving pets as a gift, at any time of the year, is never a good idea. Pets received as gifts often end up in shelters. Instead of giving a pet as a gift, the SFSPCA recommends giving loved ones a gift certificate from a local animal shelter. That way, recipients can make a decision for themselves.
2. The presence of crowds and disruption of everyday routines can be upsetting to pets and increase their chances of getting lost. Make sure that pets are microchipped and wear a collar and tags at all times. Also, consider creating a quiet place for pets to escape from the chaos of holiday celebrations.
3. One of the biggest problems veterinarians see during the holidays is pets ingesting food that they shouldn't eat. Keep pets on a normal diet during the holiday season. Never give pets poultry bones, poultry skin, gravy, eggnog, alcohol or chocolate. Make sure that kitchen counters are cleared and trash cans are secured so pets can't get into anything hazardous.
4. Holiday decorations can become a serious hazard to curious pets. Be sure to stand the Christmas tree on a flat surface and anchor it properly. Cover the tree stand to prevent pets from drinking stagnant water. Rub electrical cords with bitter apple or a powerful taste deterrent. For climbing felines, rub fresh lemon peel on the base of the tree. As an alternative to using glass ornaments or tinsel, decorate the tree with wooden, cloth or natural ornaments fastened with ribbons instead of sharp hooks. Keep festive, yet potentially toxic, poinsettias, mistletoe and holly berries out of the reach of pets.
5. The winter months are among the busiest times to travel; however, traveling can pose significant risks to accompanying pets. Depending on age, temperament and experience, pets may be happier with a pet sitter or in a boarding kennel. Car travel may be the best option for a pet because most trains, bus lines and cruise ships do not allow animals. If flying is necessary, try to carry pets in the cabin. Avoid traveling during the holidays, weekends or peak hours. Take afternoon flights when temperatures are warmer and take direct flights — layovers and connections increase the chance of mishaps. When packing for travel, be sure to include the pet's toys, bedding, a leash or harness, litterbox, cleaning supplies, a first-aid kit, medical records, medications and the phone number of a veterinarian.
6. Pet owners can't call 911 for pet emergencies, so prepare ahead of time for potential emergencies by researching the holiday hours of veterinarians and where to take pets after hours. Keep emergency telephone numbers handy. The Animal Poison Control Center has a 24-hour, 7-days a week hotline. The toll-free number is (888) 426-4435.
7. If animals get wet, be sure to towel them off and keep them in a warm room until dry. Only use a hair dryer if a pet is not frightened of it and always keep the temperature setting on low.
8. Monitor pet activity levels and adjust food portions accordingly. Pets that spend a significant amount of time outdoors burn more calories keeping warm, so they may need extra food. On the other hand, some indoor animals gain weight because of enforced inactivity and may require less food.
9. Always supervise animals around fireplaces and space heaters. Extinguish all candles when leaving the room.
10. Check cars before driving because pets and wildlife often curl up for warmth in the engine. In addition, be aware that anti-freeze is tasty to pets, yet highly toxic.