

Winter well-being tips for pet health



Vita are here to help with festive tips to keep your pets safe and well. With unpredictable weather, cold temperatures and shorter day-lengths it can be difficult to squeeze in enough exercise which, together with too many Christmas treats, can lead to weight gain. There are also plenty of festive and winter hazards ranging from anti-freeze to dried fruit, and of course the fireworks on New Year's Eve. Here are Vita's top ten tips for pet health and well-being this winter.

1. **Plan a winter-friendly exercise routine.** Short, frequent walks are better for dogs than one long one as they can get very cold pads. You should be sure to check between your dog's pads after each walk particularly in the snow or frost as they can get painful snowballs between their toes. Older dogs can also get joint stiffening. If you are a horse owner planning to ride over the winter, try to avoid getting your horse sweated up in the afternoon as they will get very cold overnight if they are damp.
2. **Let their hair grow!** It's better to allow your pet develop a thicker, longer winter coat rather than clip it short. You can also consider a jacket which is great for short-haired or smaller dogs to keep them toasty warm. However, take care as a wet coat can actually have the opposite effect. It's best to use a waterproof coat on wet, cold days.
3. **Beware of antifreeze and rock salt.** Both of these can be very toxic to pets. Antifreeze causes a range of signs that can include vomiting, depression, lack of coordination and changes to breathing. The signs with rock salt are less easy to detect. If you are concerned your pet may have consumed even a small amount of either substance, please take them to your vet for a check-up.
4. **Don't feed your pets mince pies.** Lots of foods are safe for humans but very bad or even poisonous to pets. Anything that contains dried fruit such as mince pies, Christmas cake and Christmas pudding should not be fed. Chocolate is also very toxic. If in doubt about whether something is safe, stick to treats that are specifically designed for pets.



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5. **Keep outdoor pets warm.** Small mammals that are living outdoors will need to be kept warm and sheltered during the winter months, with many owners bringing them indoors (taking care that they are then not too hot!). Any outdoor pets should have plenty of warm, dry bedding and might require extra insulation around their hutch. Also take care that fresh water is available at all times, as bowls and bottles can freeze up, leading to dehydration.

6. **Observe changes in behaviour.** During the cold months symptoms of certain diseases such as osteoarthritis can increase. Sometimes the behavioural changes can be subtle, and cats in particular may not show many signs. You can use an observation chart which will provide your vet with more information to inform a potential diagnosis and personalised treatment plan¹. Download our FREE feline observation charts² for owners here: vita.sh/ObsCat.



7. **Be visible in the dark.** There are a wide range of reflective dog collars, or even ones that glow and flash in the dark. This helps keep your pet visible to other walkers, cyclists and drivers if you need to walk your pet outside of daylight hours.



8. **Supervise your pets around Christmas decorations.** Tinsel, trees and baubles all look festive but can be hazardous to pets. Christmas decorations can lead to gut obstructions if swallowed, and pets should be taken to a vet immediately if this occurs.

9. **Check your car before you drive.** The space above the car wheel is warm and sheltered, so can be attractive to cats looking for a comfortable space to snooze. They have also been known to find their way under the bonnet next to the warm engine, so be sure to check for cats before you get in your car to drive.

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10. **Prepare for fireworks.** Many pets experience noise anxiety during fireworks, but there are some things you can try to help. Fireworks are less likely to be set off before it gets dark, so walking pets in the light can help to avoid them. Close your curtains and play some music or radio to help cover the noise from the fireworks. Some pets like to have access to different hiding places around the house where they feel safe. Noise desensitisation is very effective at reducing firework anxiety in dogs but needs to be carried out in advance³. The younger you start training your dog, the better. So if you're welcoming a new puppy for Christmas make this part of your training routine.
11. **Support pet health in winter.** Vita's veterinary exclusive supplement **Omnicondro** (vita.sh/omnicondro) can help to support normal joint function through cold winter days.



1. Zamprogno H, Hansen BD, Bondell HD, Sumrell AT, Simpson W, Robertson ID, Brown J, Pease AP, Roe SC, Hardie EM, Wheeler SJ, Lascelles BD. *Item generation and design testing of a questionnaire to assess degenerative joint disease-associated pain in cats.* Am J Vet Res. 2010;71:1417-24.
2. Caney S. *Feline Arthritis.* Feline Focus, 2007, 17(3) 11-17.
3. Levine ED, Ramos D, Mills DS. *A prospective study of two self-help CD based desensitization and counter-conditioning programmes with the use of Dog Appeasing Pheromone for the treatment of firework fears in dogs (Canis familiaris) ☆ Applied Animal Behaviour Science, 2007, 105(4), 311-329*

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