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Keep Fido - and Fluffy - cool in summer heat

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Did you know that the term "dog days of summer" evolved from early Romans who noticed that the star Sirius, the "dog star," appeared in the Canis Major (greater dog) constellation during July and August? July sure has defined dog days with its scorching heat that brought us this close to exceeding all records.

August threatens to do the same. Many readers have shared how they stepped up to the plate when they spotted a dog trapped in a hot car, either confronting the pet owner or calling the police.

But here's another caution brought to my attention by Mary Riccio of Nutley, who wrote: "Today, I saw a man riding his bike dragging his dog along. This is the second time I've seen someone doing this in the extreme heat. This time it was a big, heavy Lab lumbering along with his tongue hanging out trying to keep up with his owner. Every time I see this, it breaks my heart because I feel so helpless to stop it."

In soaring heat, it's just plain reckless to ride a bike with a dog forced to keep up.

The dog has no choice. If the dog gets exhausted, how do you return to the home site?

It's hard to ride a bike slowly enough for the dog to catch its breath. In principle, there's nothing wrong with the practice in cooler weather as long as the dog isn't overtaxed.

Suggestions have flooded in from the National Association of Professional Pet Sitters, PETA and **Pet's Best Friend NJ** offering ways to handle pets when it feels like the Mojave Desert at noon.

While you break into a chorus of "We're havin' a heat wave," consider a composite of tips:

- Keep pets hydrated. Keep water in a shady place outside and take some with you when exercising/walking.
- Never leave a dog unattended in a vehicle, even for a few minutes; temps can exceed 120 degrees in minutes, even with the windows cracked.
- The warning signs of heatstroke in dogs are: excessive panting, deep-red tongue or gums, drooling and/or vomiting. In extreme cases, symptoms could include stupor, seizures and collapse.
- Take extra care with flat-faced dogs (pugs, boxers), Persian cats, puppies and kittens, older pets and overweight pets. All are more susceptible to heatstroke.
- Overweight or elderly pets with heart or lung diseases should be kept inside as much as possible.
- Be careful around pools. Dogs may instinctively know how to swim, but not know how to get out of a pool. Always supervise.
- The trimming of a dog's fur in summer depends on the breed, but no dog should be shaved down to his skin because they'll have a hard time insulating themselves, making them prone to sunburn and other skin irritations. Some dogs should not be trimmed at all. Check with your vet.
- Try to keep dogs off paved surfaces in the heat; pavement can be 40 degrees hotter than the air and paws can burn on hot concrete. Avoid that problem by walking early or late in the day. Grass or dirt surfaces are ideal when temps soar.
- Dogs have fewer sweat glands than humans; most of their sweat glands are in their foot pads. Otherwise, a dog's prime "cooling system" is panting. There are no sweat glands in the tongue. Dogs pant to move air across their tongues to create saliva, which helps cool them down.
- Forget about jogging with a dog unless it's a cool day with low humidity.
- Remember that the hottest times of day are between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. So take dogs outside before or after that time period. "Even though heat zaps energy, it's important to know that dogs still need a physical outlet," says Chris Rago, owner of Pet's Best Friend NJ pet fitness and care centers in Bergen County. "It's possible for dogs to get fulfilling walks in summer with frequent rests, plenty of shade, cool surfaces to walk on and plenty of hydration." The rest of the day, keep dogs and cats in air conditioned comfort, he says.

QUICK COOLING TIPS

- Turn on the sprinkler or fill the kiddie pool for your dog to enjoy.
- Place cool wet towels on the dog's belly.
- If a dog is in clear heat-related distress, place it in a bathtub with cool water up to its belly.

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Summer weather can be hard on dogs. When taking them out, go earlier or later in the day and always offer a cooling drink.