

Heatstroke (Hyperthermia) in Cats

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Heatstroke occurs when normal body mechanisms cannot keep the body's temperature in a safe range. Animals do not have efficient cooling systems (like humans who sweat) and get overheated easily. A cat with moderate heatstroke (body temperature from 104° to 106°F) can recover within an hour if given prompt first aid and veterinary care (normal body temperature is 99.5-102.5°F). Severe heatstroke (body temperature over 106°F) can be deadly and immediate veterinary assistance is needed.

Signs

A cat suffering from heatstroke will display several signs:

- Rapid panting
- Bright red tongue
- Red or pale gums
- Thick, sticky saliva
- Depression
- Weakness
- Dizziness
- Vomiting - sometimes with blood
- Diarrhea
- Shock
- Coma

What you should do

Remove the cat from the hot area immediately. Prior to taking him to your veterinarian, lower his temperature by wetting him thoroughly with lukewarm water, then increase air movement around him with a fan. **CAUTION:** Using very cold water can actually be counterproductive. Cooling too quickly and especially allowing his body temperature to become too low can cause other life-threatening medical conditions. The rectal temperature should be checked every 5 minutes. Once the body temperature is 103°F, the cooling measures should be stopped and the cat should be dried thoroughly and covered so he does not continue to lose heat. Even if the cat appears to be recovering, take him to your veterinarian as soon as possible. He should still be examined since he may be dehydrated or have other complications.

Allow free access to water or a children's rehydrating solution if the cat can drink on his own. Do not try to force-feed cold water; the cat may inhale it or choke.

What your veterinarian will do

Your veterinarian will lower your cat's body temperature to a safe range (if you have not already) and continually monitor his temperature. Your cat will be given fluids, and possibly oxygen. He will be monitored for shock, respiratory distress, kidney failure, heart abnormalities, and other complications, and treated accordingly. Blood samples may be taken before and during the treatment. The clotting time of the blood will be monitored, since clotting problems are a common complication.

Aftercare

Cats with moderate heatstroke often recover without complicating health problems. Severe heatstroke can cause organ damage that might need ongoing care such as a special diet prescribed by your veterinarian. Cats who suffer from heatstroke once increase their risk for getting it again and steps must be taken to prevent it on hot, humid days.

Prevention

Any pet that cannot cool himself off is at risk for heatstroke. Following these guidelines can help prevent serious problems.

- Keep cats with predisposing conditions like heart disease, obesity, older age, or breathing problems cool and in the shade. Even normal activity for these pets can be harmful.
- Provide access to water at all times.
- Do not leave your cat in a hot parked car even if you're in the shade or will only be gone a short time. The temperature inside a parked car can quickly reach up to 140 degrees.
- Make sure outside cats have access to shade.
- Allow your cat to have access to cooler areas of the house.