

HEAT STROKE ON THE TRAIL

BY DR TERI

It's been a crazy 'summer' here in the northwest...or as I like to say, it's been a crazy 3 hours of summer here and there, in between a few hours of fall, some of winter...well, you get my drift. This year the usual rule of summer just doesn't seem to apply, let your pets adjust to the heat gradually over several weeks before attempting strenuous exercise in the heat. How to adjust when the temperatures fly between 60 and 100 in the same day? So there will be no adjusting this year, just constant vigilance!

Heat stroke occurs when the body's temperature and cooling mechanisms are overwhelmed. This is a physical crisis that far exceeds mere overheating. Conditions associated with heat stroke are multiple organ failure, life threatening drops in blood sugar and catastrophic collapse in blood pressure. In other words, if your dog collapses on the trail, getting water into him or throwing him into a cool stream may not be enough to save him. The best way to treat heat stroke on the trail is to avoid it!

If it is going to be a hot day and you are planning that trip up Mt Si take a minute to think. Does Spot really need to go? Is Spot fit enough to go? Older dogs, overweight dogs, and dogs who pant heavily even on a cool day are dogs who should stay home. It took us almost 3 hours last summer to cross a mile long SNOW field with our black dog Scoop! He was young, incredibly fit and normally outruns us in quadruplicates. The sun was blaring down and he was catching it from all sides and absorbing it into his black coat. We kept stopping to give him water, and then stopping to melt snow for him. He did fine, our hike suffered terribly!

If you DO bring Fido, bring lots of water and a good bowl. Stop often and offer it. If you cross streams use the bowl to wet the both of you down. If it's too hot, TURN BACK! It's not a bad idea to bring some quickly digestible snacks such as hot dog or dehydrated meats, but hiking dogs are working hard and should not eat too much as they can suffer grave stomach issues such as bloat. There are cooling jackets that keep dogs cool ie at dog shows, but be careful when using these on heavily exercising dogs that they are not just making them warmer!

As being overheated leads to heat exhaustion and then to stroke (collapse), signs can include weakness, loss of balance, excessive or loud panting, collapse and sudden death. If these things occur, stop immediately. If water is available, cool his surface as best as you can, though sudden immersion into freezing water can actually make heat stroke worse. If you have a sugar gel, such as Goo, that is CAFFEINE-FREE you can place a small glob under his tongue in case his sugar is low. Start making plans for as rapid an evacuation as possible. Get her to your veterinarian immediately, so that normal kidney perfusion can be established. I recommend this even if Spot seems 'normal' when you back to the car. This is one place where it is definitely better to be safe than to be sorry.