



Always consult with a veterinarian that you feel comfortable with before diagnosing or treating any disease on your own. This information is for reference only.

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Frostbite

Issue Description

The definition of frostbite is the same for all mammals: damage to tissue caused by subfreezing temperatures. The severity of the frostbite is based on the extent of blistering, swelling, and skin color of the affected tissue.

Symptoms

In dogs, the early signs of frostbite are easily missed as the areas affected are usually covered with hair. These areas are the ear tips, tail, scrotum, and face. When frozen or near-frozen, the skin appears very pale. As the skin warms, it becomes reddened and the area becomes painful. Eventually the skin becomes scaly. If the circulation has been severely affected, the tips or edges of the tissue may slough off. Severe cases of frostbite may necessitate amputation of the affected tissue. If amputation is necessary, this determination is made over a length of time which depends on the severity of the frostbite. The affected area will have a definite line (demarcation) between live and dead tissue.

Treatment

First aid in the early stages, when the tissue is still soft, involves warming the affected tissue with warm water. Do not massage the area as this may cause the release of toxins which may further damage already impaired tissues. Instead, gently apply a protective Vaseline- based ointment and cover the area if possible. If the ointment is warm, it will spread more easily, especially in those areas covered with hair. This can be done in the field by placing the ointment tube next to your skin. If the tissue is not malleable and/or the possibility of refreezing exists, don't attempt field rewarming. Instead transport to a veterinarian ASAP. The rewarming that can occur during transport in a warm vehicle is painful. Do not turn the heat on high, but keep the vehicle at a cool to moderate temperature. If possible, the handler should not be driving but should sit with or hold the dog to prevent the scratching or biting at the painful area.

Prevention

For handlers who frequent working their dogs in cold weather conditions, these additions to their first aid kits should be considered:

1. Absorbent towels for drying dog;
2. Space blanket or other heat reflective blanket;
3. Thick sport weight or wool socks (kid's size to fit paws) 2 pair;
4. Cold weather dog jacket if appropriate for dog;
5. Vaseline based ointment.

Prevention of frostbite and hypothermia is possible by observing your dog frequently and providing the necessary support before trouble arrives. If your dog does not have an adequate coat, provide it with an artificial coat. Have a pad to insulate the dog from the cold ground when it must be in one place. Make sure that when you take a break and warm up, you get out the pad and give food and water. Check the temperature of the ears, scrotum and face, watching for signs of frostbite. As the "thinking" 1/2 of the team, it is the handler's responsibility to monitor the canine partner.

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