



FEATURE

Protect your Pets from the Sun

Many pet owners are unknowingly leaving their dogs and cats exposed to developing skin cancer because they don't realise the impact the sun can have on their pet's health, according to the head of an Australian home visit vet booking service.

Melbourne veterinarian Dr Vadim Chelom, chief executive officer of app-based service Pawssum Vets, said dogs and cats were very prone to skin cancer, but many owners simply weren't aware of the risks.

"Because they have fur, we just don't think about protecting them from the sun the way we think about protecting our own skin, but sun exposure is a big issue because dogs and cats can get sunburned, but they won't avoid the sun, even in high temperatures," Dr Chelom explained. "These animals usually develop cancers in places which are hairless, so their nose, eyelids, ears and abdomen are at increased risk, especially the belly, because many dogs love to sunbake on their back."

"Dogs with very thin hair don't follow the rules; they can get skin cancer anywhere and pale dogs and cats are also more likely to develop it."

According to Pets Insurance Australia, in 2016 there were approximately 1,500 claims Australia-wide for skin cancer in dogs. Cats also suffer the effects of skin cancer, but statistics indicate not as much as dogs.

"Skin cancers in dogs and cats are usually not melanomas, so they are often not pigmented, they can be completely white, which can make them hard to spot by owners," said Dr Chelom. "And, in cats in particular, skin cancers are often not lumps at all, they may be erosions on skin which can be very confusing."

"In short, it's best to have a vet examine every lump in dogs or cats because there's no way to tell skin cancer by looking at it and, if you're worried, sooner rather than later is better, because delaying a skin check may allow the cancer to spread, making it too late to treat."

Dr Chelom also issued a warning about sunscreens and pets.

"Human sunscreens can be toxic to dogs! The ones with zinc in them can cause gastrointestinal issues so should be avoided," he said. "Pet sunscreens are safe, but shouldn't be solely relied upon, because it's hard to apply them to the right areas. They only last for two hours or so, and pets often will lick them off."

Sun Safety Tips for Pets

- Offer multiple sources of shade for your dog or cat; having it in one place is not enough. Providing shade is the only way to protect your pet, but note that shade-cloths and lighter materials may not provide enough protection.
- Sun coming in through windows is still dangerous. Don't allow your pets (cats especially love this) to spend a long time on the windowsill on a hot day.
- Dogs and cats that live in harsher climates of Australia are more at risk, so be extra careful in those areas.
- Doggy hats and t-shirts have their place, especially if shade is limited. When using these make sure they cover the problem areas: nose, eyelids, ears and abdomen.
- Window tinting can be helpful, if you can't block the light coming in your home or car.
- Pets can also experience heatstroke because they don't sweat like humans do, only pant. Watch for signs of heatstroke, such as excessive panting, weakness, high fever, lethargy, vomiting and unresponsiveness.
- When walking your pet on hot days, ensure they have plenty of water, shade and rest along the way and avoid exercising in the hottest part of the day.

Source: Pawssum Vets

Pawssum's on-demand veterinarians can deliver 80% of a pet's health care needs in the home or office, including vaccinations, health checks, dental checks, behaviourist consultations and peaceful at-home euthanasia for increased comfort and privacy.

Photo supplied by Lyndel Porter

