

FACT SHEET



Greyhounds and the Cold

Greyhounds have relatively thin skin and very little body fat compared to other breeds of dog. This is great for helping them cool down after a run, but it also means that they are very susceptible to the effects of colder weather. The need to maintain their vital organs at a fairly constant temperature means that the body has to work harder during the winter to keep things warm. This can have important consequences on diet, exercise, and injury.

The body is an amazing thing. Like in humans, if the greyhound's core temperature drops, the body automatically tries to keep the important organs warm by restricting the blood flow to the skin and extremities. This is to **reduce the loss of heat** that occurs in these areas. You will have all experienced cold fingers and hands on a very brisk morning, and also the exposed skin that feels cool to the touch and is kind of bluish in colour. This same process happens in greyhounds to try to conserve heat when the ambient temperature is low.

If this is not enough to maintain the core temperature, the body will try to **generate** heat by 'shivering' – this is involuntary muscle activity that occurs throughout the body. Shivering is an indicator of significant temperature change within the body, and it uses up quite a bit of energy to generate the muscle contractions.

Past this point the dog (or person) enters into hypothermia (*hypo* – meaning 'below', *-thermia* meaning 'temperature'). Hypothermia can lead to unconsciousness, coma and death as the vital organs become too cold to operate properly. Long periods of restricted circulation to the extremities can also lead to tissue death – think of those climbers who spend months on Mt Everest, most have lost a few fingers or toes, and even the tip of their nose due to the effects of prolonged cold!!

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For the greyhound, being cold is not only uncomfortable, but it can mean that they lose condition due to the change in their energy requirements. Now they not only have to fuel their normal activity, but also have to use energy to create warmth just to function normally on the inside. This may mean they need more calories in their daily diet.

Cold muscles are also more susceptible to injuries, ranging from minor tears, to quite serious ones. Add to this the risks associated with wet and slippery ground, and you have a recipe for disaster if you are not careful.

So what can you do to minimize the risks associated with the cold weather?

Make sure that your greyhound is kept warm when the weather is cold.

This may mean ensuring that there is warm bedding in the kennel, a bed that is well off the cold ground, and making sure that the place your greyhound sleeps is not leaking or subject to draughts.

Winter weather does not make it easy to keep things clean and dry, but wet dogs, wet bedding, and wet kennels can lead to very cold greyhounds.

Greyhounds love the warmth of a heater or fire-place. If you decide to use heating, make sure that the heater is safe, can't be accidentally tipped over, and that any power cords cannot be reached by the greyhound. If you have a fire-place, make sure that your greyhound cannot burn itself on hot fittings or accidentally access the active flame.

It is also an idea to put a warm coat or jacket on your greyhound, especially in the evenings and over-night. Make sure that coats are regularly inspected for damage, and are not tied on so tight that they are uncomfortable when the greyhound curls up, nor so loose that the dogs are constantly getting tangled in them. All coats and jackets should be regularly cleaned too! Boy dogs are particularly notorious for peeing on the edges of their coats!

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Watch the condition of your dogs

It may be that your greyhound needs a little extra food to maintain condition in the winter time. Monitoring skin and coat condition, levels of body fat, and body weight will quickly tell you if things are going astray. If your dog is kept warm (especially if your greyhound spends a lot of time inside the house) this might not happen, but if you are watching for it, you can minimize the effects of the cold, and act before the greyhound loses too much condition.

Pay particular attention to warming up before exercise

Before any dog exercises, there should be a warm up period where the dog is prepared for the exertion of running around at full speed. Warm ups increase the blood flow to the muscles, and also help prepare the body for increased demand. Warming a dog up might start with a brisk walk, followed by some trotting. When you start feeling warm yourself, your greyhound will be nearly ready to have a good run.

Be wary of slippery surfaces

Greyhounds can be very agile, but they can also run around at a speed that puts them at risk of slipping and sliding if the footing is not good. This can put them at an increased risk of injury. Greyhounds can also slip and slide on wet tiles or floor boards, so be careful that your greyhound is not too silly if the floor is slippery. If your greyhound gets excited when it first comes into the house, simply putting it on the lead for the first 15 minutes or so will help keep things under control, and prevent a nasty injury.