

Dr. Cindy's Pet Health Corner: Heat Stroke in Dogs

By Cynthia D. Burnett, DVM

“Sparky”, a large black Labrador Retriever, had responsible owners who thought they were taking good care of him in the summertime. When they left him in a fenced yard one day in July they filled a wading pool for him, as well as leaving a large bowl of drinking water. However, when they returned several hours later Sparky was in obvious distress. He was panting and salivating uncontrollably, and he could not get up on his own.

Whether they knew it or not at that moment, Sparky's owners were witnessing heat stroke, when the body's core temperature rises beyond its capacity to cool itself and the body's systems begin to shut down. Heat stroke is very serious and requires immediate medical attention. It can result in brain damage and death. Large breed and overweight dogs are particularly susceptible to heat stroke, but in our warm climate every dog is at risk.

Sparky's owners tried to cool him down by spraying him with a hose, which did not help. They then moved him inside to the air-conditioning, but when he did not improve they brought him to the hospital. We immediately began working to bring his core temperature down by putting in two intravenous lines to give him fluids, and by giving him medicine to control the seizures that can result from the brain being overheated. We also sprayed his paw pads with alcohol, as dogs only dissipate heat by panting and through the pads of their paws. Our goal in treating heat stroke is to bring

the pet's temperature down in a controlled way, as it can go into shock if its temperature drops too rapidly.

Signs of heat stroke include:

- Uncontrolled panting and salivation, even in a cool environment
- Inability to rise
- Bright red gums (gums will eventually turn gray in the most severe cases)
- Seizures

Fortunately for Sparky, his owners sought treatment early enough to make a difference and he did recover, but what happened to him could happen to any dog. Prevention is the key when it comes to heat stroke, as even a mild case can have permanent effects.

Tips on Preventing Heat Stroke

- Leave your dog in the house on hot days
- Restrict exercise to the early morning and late evening
- NEVER leave your dog in a car with no air conditioning
- Replace electrolytes by putting two tablespoons of a sports drink in the dog's water bowl
- Have cool water and shade available to your dog at all times when outside
- Moving air is critical to a dog's ability to stay cool, use a fan if necessary
- Call your veterinarian if you suspect heat stroke