

Investigating Heat-Related Illness and Death: A Guide for Law Enforcement

Signs of heat-related illness/heat stroke:

- o Heavy panting, excessive drooling, glazed eyes, rapid pulse, unsteadiness/staggering, bloody vomit, bloody diarrhea or nose bleed, dry, deep red or purple tongue, hemorrhages in the gums or under skin, coma/death.
- o A temperature over 104°F.

Providing care to dogs with suspected heat-related illness:

- o Seek veterinary care as soon as possible, even if the dog appears to be improving. While waiting for a veterinarian:
 - Move the dog to a cooler area.
 - Gradually lower his body temperature by applying cool (not cold) water all over his body or soaking him in a cool bath.
 - Place cool, wet towels over the back of the neck and in the armpits, paws, ear flaps and groin area.
 - Direct a fan on the wet areas to speed evaporative cooling.
 - Offer fresh, cool water if the dog is alert and wants to drink. Do not force him to drink.

Investigation and Documentation If you suspect heat-related illness, injury or death:

- o Take the animal's temperature at the time of contact. Document it with written notes and a photograph.
- o Obtain a weather report for the incident date, including the temperature, heat index and humidity.

If the dog was left in a vehicle:

- o Immediately document the dog's temperature and the temperature inside the vehicle.
- o Document any physical signs of heat stroke (see list above).
- o If in public, obtain video surveillance to document how long the dog was left in the car.
- o Photograph the condition of the car, including shade, ventilation, etc.
- o Look for signs of attempted escape, including claw marks.
- o Immediately take the dog to a veterinarian for examination.

If the dog perishes, pursue a full necropsy by a veterinarian:

- o Highlight supportive findings, including organ failure and necrosis or internal bleeding.
- o If a necropsy isn't possible, document this finding. This happens when the heat is so extreme that the internal organs become necrotic.
- o Look for abnormalities in the body's rigidity. Permanent rigidity is unique to heat-related deaths. Dogs also might exhibit rigidity that's more marked than traditional rigor mortis, which remains until the body softens due to decomposition.



In all cases:

- o Obtain statements from witnesses.
- o Obtain veterinary records.
- o Use the totality of the circumstances surrounding the incident to prove that it was heat-related and rule out other causes of death.

Recommended tools:

- o Digital thermometer: Use to take the temperature of living or deceased dogs at the time of contact.
- o Digital cooking thermometer/timer: Use the probe to get an accurate temperature reading inside the vehicle without opening the door and letting the air out. A magnet on the back allows it to be affixed to the car to photograph, showing that the vehicle temperature was documented properly.



**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

humanesociety.org

PHOTO BY STEPHAN STOCKINGER/STOCKPHOTO