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In hot car, 'just a minute' can be deadly for dogs

Even at just 72 degrees, a car parked in direct sunlight can reach 116

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The Associated Press

updated 1:44 p.m. MT, Wed., May 13, 2009

If you've ever left your dog in the car for "just five minutes" on a summer day, the officers of the Washington Humane Society want you to hear some cautionary tales.

"They all say the same thing: I never thought that this would happen," says Mitchell Battle, deputy director of humane law enforcement at the Washington Humane Society. "I was only going to be gone for two minutes."

But just running inside for a quick errand can be deadly to your pet — even if the weather isn't all that hot.

In one fatal incident Battle responded to, the temperature was only in the 70s. A woman stopped at home, parked in the shade and came out after what she said was 15 minutes. By the time officers got there, the shade had moved, turning the car into what officer Eve Russell calls "a solar powered Easy-Bake oven."

Everyone's opened a car door and been amazed by how much hotter it is than outside — but you may not realize exactly how hot a car can get. Check out the numbers at the Web site mydogiscool.com, a program of United Animal Nations. When it's 72 degrees, a car in direct sun can reach an internal temperature of 116. Even in the shade, a car can be 10 to 20 degrees hotter than outdoors, and cracking the window has almost no effect.

Veterinarian Cate Rinaldo, a volunteer with United Animal Nations, points out that dogs don't have sweat glands all over their bodies like humans do, so the main way they can cool off is by panting, which isn't very efficient.

Once a dog's body temperature gets over about 106 — normal temperature is around 101 — the result is "everything from nerve damage, heart problems, liver damage, systemic organ failure, and it happens fast, within a matter of minutes," she says.

Summer is also vacation season, and the Washington officers are often called to cases where people travelling with their dogs tried to use the car to extend their stay by a few hours.

"They check out of their hotel at noon and they still want to go to the zoo or a museum, and they leave Fluffy in the car," says officer Ann Russell.

Remember that one more museum isn't worth the risk to your pet's life — and that cars are not the only place where dogs can get overheated. Rinaldo says that before she was a vet and knew of the dangers, one of her dogs collapsed from heat exhaustion after playing off-leash on a 75 degree day.

That dog survived, but not all are so lucky. One 90 degree day in the San Bernadino mountains, Andy Hoodward of Orange, Calif., was flagged down by a couple carrying their dog in a backpack.

"The woman explained that they had set out hiking in the morning but a couple of miles in, the dog had become lethargic, unresponsive and would neither walk nor drink," says Hoodward.

The couple were also in bad shape, and Hoodward drove them to a ranger's station, but it was too late for the dog, which died on the trip.

And officers say anyone can be the victim of inattention or miscalculation. Officer Ann Russell tells of one woman who worked with autistic children and was a volunteer guide dog puppy raiser — "the most responsible person you can imagine," she says. In an emergency with one of the children, the woman accidentally left a puppy in a car and it died.

Even indoors, it can get too hot for some animals. Battle tells of an elderly, overweight beagle that died of heat exhaustion in his own home; sadly, the house did have central air conditioning but the owners hadn't left it on

since there were no people home.

Be especially careful if you confine your dog to a crate or one area of the house and he's not free to seek a cooler spot. If you leave your dogs outside, even on a patio or deck, make sure they have shade all day and remember that the sun moves. Use a tarp or awning to shade the spot, and perhaps reconsider whether your dogs might be happier indoors.

"Go out there barefoot and step on the concrete where your dogs are," says Battle. "It's not as comfortable as you think it is."

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