Turning Up the Heat

Summertime thrills can also mean summertime ills. Take the proper precautions.

By Karen Commins

Summer is here in all its radiant glory, and your cat may experience new thrills by watching the influx of summer birds from an open window or—if your cat goes outside—by chasing bugs through the summer grass. But hot weather is potentially dangerous if your cat gets no relief from the sun's rays and its heat.

Solar Dermatitis

While your cat will benefit from the extra vitamin D she soaks up from the sun streaming through a screened window, sunlight may be hazardous if she gets too much of a good thing. Cats that suffer from overexposure to sunlight can get sunburn just like we can. And your cat doesn't need the sun's heat to be affected. Too much sunlight can burn a cat even when it's cooler outside. Sunburn is usually seen first as an inflammation on the cat's ears, nose, eyelids and lips. The skin may become red and flaky. Prolonged exposure to the sun may lead to skin lesions and ultimately cancer, just as in humans.

Cats deficient in melanin, the pigment that produces the black coat, are most often affected by solar dermatitis. That includes cats that are light in color, all white or who have white ears and faces. Cats living at higher altitudes where the earth's protective atmosphere is thinner, and allows penetration of more ultraviolet rays, are also at greater risk for sunburn.

As with all illnesses, prevention is the best cure. If your cat is partially or completely white, keep her out of direct sunlight even if she is indoors lying in front of a screened window. If necessary, block off access to open windows through which direct sunlight passes.

If your cat does suffer from sunburn, soak a cotton ball in witch hazel and apply it to the burned areas three or four times a day. If you have an aloe plant in the house, break off a part of it and squeeze out the soothing gel and apply it to your cat's sunburned skin. Or, obtain a veterinarian-approved topical sunscreen for your cat. As with all applied ointments, be careful not to get any in your cat's eyes.

Heat Exhaustion

While we may shed those extra layers of clothing in hot weather, our cat companions must still wear their fur coats. Even though your cat will do what comes naturally to prevent suffering from the heat (such as not overdoing it in the exercise department or seeking out cooler spots to catnap), she may still suffer from heatstroke if she is exposed to high temperatures for a prolonged period of time.

Heat stroke, also called hyperthermia, is a very serious condition that can result in brain damage, liver and kidney failure, seizures, damage to other internal organs or even death. Heat stroke most often affects short-nosed breeds such as Persians, Himalayans or Exotic shorthairs because they have difficulty panting to lower their body temperature. Overweight or asthmatic cats, long-hair cats or cats with very thick coats or heavy undercoats are at risk as their hair traps more heat.

Cats are unable to lower their internal thermostats by sweating as people do. Most of a cat's sweat glands are on the pads of her feet. If you've ever noticed footprints on the...
Cats aren't big water drinkers, so watch for signs of dehydration.

metal examination table at the veterinarian's office, you've seen the results of your cat sweating from stress. Because they have few sweat glands, cats lower their body temperature primarily through panting.

Signs of heatstroke include salivating, vomiting, panting or rapid breathing, weakness, a racing pulse, a glazed expression, a rectal temperature of more than 105 degrees, col-

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Summer Travel Cautions

If you must travel with your cat in the summer, don't leave her inside a parked car. If you must stop during a road trip, park the car in the shade and keep the car's air conditioning running. Travel during the coolest parts of the day: evening, night and early morning. If you must ship your cat via an airplane, avoid shipment in the hottest months or fly at cool parts of day. Some airlines have begun to restrict animal transportation in the summer months to prevent animals from succumbing to heat related tragedies.

Change of season...Change of cat?

The dark days of winter take on a whole new meaning if you have a Siamese cat. In a warm climate, your Siamese cat may be lighter in color than one living in a colder geographic region. And, if you move to a colder location, expect his coat to darken. Siamese kittens born in the summer will be lighter than kittens born in the winter, even to the same parents. “The Siamese coat, or the coat of any cat that has the pointed pattern, changes color depending upon the temperature,” says J. Anne Helgren, author of Himalayan Cats: a Complete Pet Owner's Manual (Barron's, 1996).

The amount of pigment produced in the Siamese is controlled by a temperature-sensitive enzyme that produces greater depth of color at the parts of the body farthest away from the cardiovascular system. That includes the ears, feet, tail and face. “The skin temperature of the body's extremities is a few degrees lower than the rest of the body, and therefore attracts more pigmentation,” says Helgren. “The cooler the environment, the darker the color becomes, and the warmer the environment, the lighter the color becomes.”

Ever wonder why Siamese kittens are born white, and a color pattern gradually appears as they age? “Siamese kittens are born pure white from being cradled in the warmth of mom's womb, and begin to develop their color several weeks after birth,” says Helgren.

If your cat goes outdoors, keep her inside during the hottest part of the day, between 10am and 4pm. Make sure she has a bowl of cool, fresh water, indoors or out. Place a few ice cubes in it to keep it cool. Some cats prefer standing water that is room temperature, so just make sure the water is fresh daily. Put a cooling pack inside a towel and place it where she sleeps. If your cat has long hair, consider taking her to a groomer for a haircut that will help heat escape in hot weather. If she has a thick undercoat, regularly brush her with an undercoat rake during warm weather.

Some simple precautions should prevent your cat from suffering from heatstroke. If your cat stays indoors, run the air conditioner during the hot months. If you have no air conditioning, provide adequate ventilation by running a fan or place securely-fasted screens in open windows. This is especially important if you live in an upper-story apartment that may trap heat during the hottest parts of the day. Keep drapes closed to prevent sunlight from pouring in and heating up your house.

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