

# HEAT STROKE!

by Vicki DeGruy

**H**eat stroke kills someone's beloved Chow every year. The real tragedy is that heat stroke is preventable. In this article, I'm going to tell you how to recognize heat stroke, how to manage it until you can get emergency veterinary care, and most importantly, how to avoid it.

If you're comfortable on a warm day, is your Chow comfortable, too? Probably not! Dogs feel the heat sooner than we do and are poorly equipped to handle it. A dog's cooling system is very different from ours and much less efficient. We're able to cool ourselves by sweating: moisture evaporates from the large skin surface area of our bodies, making us walking air conditioners. Dogs, however, have only two basic means of cooling their bodies: 1) panting; the rapid intake of cool air into their lungs 2) sweating through the pads of their feet. Neither of these is very helpful in a hot environment. In both dogs and people, heat stroke can occur when the internal body temperature reaches 104 degrees F. Normal body temperature for humans, though, is 98.6. Normal for dogs is 101 • 102.5. Obviously, our dogs have a far slimmer margin of comfort and safety than we do.

There are additional factors that can decrease a Chow's ability to cope with heat:

- puppies and elderly dogs are more sensitive to high temperatures
- heavy thick coats (black coats, especially, absorb heat from the sun)
- short muzzles, elongated palates, and/or narrow nostrils restrict breathing and airflow
- existing heart or lung disorders, or seizures

Prevention is the best way to deal with heat stroke. Be observant! You know how your dog behaves under normal conditions. Always watch your Chow for signs of overheating that can lead to heat stroke:

- unusually heavy panting or shallow rapid breathing
- labored or unusually noisy breathing

- tongue lolling, and pale or pinkish tongue pigment
- sweaty pawprints on the floor, grooming table or ring mat
- lethargy; wants to stop or lie down while in the ring or on walks

Some dogs may also vomit or have diarrhea. Any of these symptoms indicate your Chow is too hot and could be headed for heat stroke. Take immediate action to cool him by placing him in a cooler environment with good air circulation: a shaded area with a breeze, in front of a fan, or air conditioning. Apply ice packs or cold wet towels to his underside, groin and paw pads. Allow him to drink small amounts of cool water. (A heavily panting dog taking in large quantities of water may be at risk for bloat.) Some veterinarians recommend wiping rubbing alcohol on the exposed skin of the groin and on pads to create an evaporative cooling effect. Monitor his rectal temperature. In most common overheating situations, these actions will bring your Chow back to normal within a short time.

Left untreated, an overheated Chow can progress into heat stroke very quickly. Any of these signs in addition to those above indicate a serious, life threatening emergency:

- wide glassy eyes
- stumbling or staggering
- collapse
- seizures
- unconsciousness
- rectal temperature of 104 F. or higher

Immediately hose the dog down with cool water. Use anything and everything you can find to wet your dog. Apply ice, ice packs or water soaked towels to the head, neck, chest, abdomen and feet. Immersing the dog in a tub is useful but if left in the tub, water trapped in the coat next to the skin will become warm and act as an insulator against the cool water, stopping the cooling action. Once the dog has been soaked down, remove him from the tub and place him in front of a fan. Continue running water over the dog. A cool water enema can help provide internal cooling. A light mist of water or a wet towel

can be used to keep the tongue moist but do not encourage the dog to drink or try to pour water down his throat.

Monitor the dog's rectal temperature. Once the temperature begins to drop below 104, stop your cooling efforts, dry off the dog, and continue monitoring. The cooling process will continue on its own and the rectal temperature should drop quickly. If you wait to stop cooling until the temperature is near normal, it may continue falling and put the dog in danger of hypothermia (subnormal body temperature).

Once the temperature has begun to fall, get the dog to a veterinarian right away! Many people think that when the dog has been cooled off, no further treatment is necessary. Wrong! High internal temperatures trigger chemical reactions and metabolic disturbances in the cells of the body that can lead to cell death especially in the highly active cells of the brain, liver, and intestines. Heat stroke victims are often dehydrated as well; dehydration thickens the blood causing additional strain on the heart and dangerous blood clots. This damage might not be apparent to you at the time but can create serious problems for your dog days, weeks or months later. Only a veterinarian can provide the assistance, fluids, and medication necessary to minimize and treat the dangerous effects of heat stroke. I'll say this again: even if your Chow seems okay after you've stabilized his temperature, take him to the vet immediately for further treatment!!

## PREVENTING HEAT STROKE

Because dogs are more susceptible to heat stroke than humans, they can become overheated in lower environmental temperatures than you might realize. Even a comfortable (to us) eighty degrees can be dangerous to your Chow if the humidity is high, if his area is unshaded or poorly ventilated, if he's exerting himself while on a walk, attempting a breeding, running in the yard, fence fighting or standing at ringside for long periods of time. Never assume that the dog knows when he's had enough and will stop when he gets too hot! Many dogs will go until they

drop, literally. It's up to you to pay attention and keep them out of danger.

Exercise your Chow during the early morning or evening hours, avoiding the heat of the day. On walks, take along an insulated container of ice water for your dog. Avoid black-top surfaces that absorb and radiate heat. Keep walks and exercise periods short and stop while your Chow is still comfortable, before he becomes hot. Keep your Chow clean and well groomed so air can reach his skin. Dirty matted coats trap heat and moisture and reduce air circulation. When out in the yard, make sure your Chow has plenty of shade and fresh water. Indoors, if you don't have air conditioning, provide him with a good floor fan and access to the coolest areas of the house. Draw your shades during

the day to keep the sun from adding heat.

It should go without saying that dogs should never be left for any length of time in a vehicle or any other enclosed space with poor ventilation in warm weather. Even on a mild 70 degree day, the temperature inside a car can rise to dangerous levels in a very short time. The dog's own body heat and expired breath increase the heat and humidity of the environment. Show exhibitors, being hopefully more knowledgeable than the average person, are certainly aware of this yet it's still very common to see Chows in vehicles in warm dog show parking lots. Even with the windows down and doors open, a car or van can be a dangerous place for a Chow if additional means of cooling are not provided. The catalytic converter under the vehicle

radiates great heat for quite awhile after the car's been shut off and all that heat rises upward into the vehicle.

Above all, be vigilant and pay close attention to your Chow in warm weather! In the last cases of overheating that I've seen at a dog show, the Chows' exhibitors were not aware their dogs were in trouble until someone else pointed it out to them. Prompt action quickly brought both dogs around with no ill effects. Someone else I know wasn't so lucky. Unaware of the dangers and signs of heat stroke, he took his two Chows on a fundraising walk on hot summer day. Both dogs collapsed and died before he even knew what was wrong with them.

This doesn't have to happen to your Chow! Be aware and be prepared ... and it won't. ■

## TIPS FOR WARM WEATHER DOG SHOWS

*I actually enjoy showing in the summer and have been doing it safely for over twenty five years. Air conditioned show sites are becoming common in some places but here in the Midwest and on the West Coast, outdoor events are still the norm. Despite this, it is possible to keep a Chow comfortable and showing well in the heat. Here's how we do it:*

- **Plan ahead and be prepared.** Check the weather forecast. If you're not familiar with the show site, ask other exhibitors about it ahead of time and assess your ability to keep your dog comfortable under its conditions.
- **Be properly equipped:** wire dog crates rather than hard-sided plastic, metal or wood, shade screens, a good fan for each dog (those little clip-on crate fans are worthless! Get a real fan.), 50-100' extension cord, cooler filled with ice, plenty of water, ice packs, a "cool-bed" for the Chow to lie on, a lunchbox-sized cooler for ringside, small mist bottle. Also a cell phone, rectal thermometer, and the show schedule or premium list that has the address/phone of the show's veterinarian. If you plan to do a lot of summer shows, a free standing pop-up awning and a portable generator to provide convenient power for the fan are very worthwhile investments. If that seems like a lot of money, compare it to the cost of losing your best dog.
- **Groom at home rather than the hot show site.** Arrive as close to your scheduled ring time as possible. Many times, we don't even set up a crate or table at the site • we arrive just before our class is called and go straight from the car to the ring. Bring the lunchbox cooler to ringside. In the cooler is ice, an ice pack, the cool-bed, water and dish, washcloth, and water-filled mist bottle. Make the dog lie on the cool-bed, give water as needed, and keep him relaxed.
- **In the ring, rest the dog as much as you can; don't make him show the whole time if you don't have to.** If there's shade in the ring, use it. When it's not your turn to be judged, leave the line-up and sit in the shade. Keep a small ice pack in your pocket, hang your mist bottle on your belt. Keep the dog refreshed by periodically applying the ice pack to his groin and spraying cold water in his mouth. If your dog does become overheated, by all means ask to be excused so you can get help.
- **After the judging, if we don't have to compete again later in the day, we go home!** We leave browsing the vendors and visiting with friends for a cooler day. If we must stay, we look for the coolest place to set up. Many grooming buildings are hot and stuffy; we like the open-sided livestock barns that offer shade and air circulation. If these are not available, we put the crate outside the car under shade screening, put the dog on his cool-bed with a fan. Outside of the car is almost always cooler than inside of it.
- **Loading and unloading is a major opportunity for heat stroke especially if you bring several dogs to a show.** Dogs should be last in and first out of a vehicle. Before loading your dogs for the trip home, open the windows, turn on the a/c and give the car a chance to cool off. Don't pack equipment so tightly around the dogs that air circulation is poor or that air vents are blocked. Once the dogs are in the vehicle, get on the road and get home.