

Winter Pet Dangers: Some Ice Melts and Warm Engine Compartments

By Mark Robison

Earlier this month at our house, we finally broke out the ice melt when a washing-machine repair person visited. We know where all the hazardous spots are and avoid them, but we couldn't count on a stranger intuiting them.

So out came the jug with giant letters "PET SAFE" on the side. I used it all and went to order more and soon found myself down a rabbit hole of competing claims about which is really safe.

Apparently, some manufacturers just smooth down the ragged edges on rock salt and call that "pet safe" because it won't literally cut your dog's paws open. But, as I learned from an article at Dogs Naturally magazine, even a smooth piece of rock salt can hurt your dog's feet.

The article suggests an experiment: Put a few drops of water in a baggie, add a tablespoon of rock salt, and zip it closed. Then feel the bag.

"Salt can get lodged in between your dog's pads where it can heat up to around 170 degrees," the article says. "That's hot enough to cause burns. And the pain will cause your dog to lick his paws, which adds more moisture to his feet ... and now the salt is on his lips and tongue too."

My rule of thumb for picking an ice melter is to avoid products with warning labels. If it's risky for you, it's risky for your pet.

Calcium Magnesium Acetate seems to be an ingredient in the ice melt products that I've found (1) work and (2) I wouldn't be freaked out if my cats or dogs wandered across a swath of it.

And all of this got me to thinking of other winter dangers for pets. When I was a kid in Salt Lake City, my best friend Brad's dad drove a big truck. After parking it one winter night, a kitten crawled in the engine compartment to get warm. When morning came and he started the truck again, the kitten got hit by the fan. The kitten survived but was pretty cut up and took a long time to heal.

In some neighborhoods, free roaming cats are rare, but they can be found in many places. But free-roaming cats do tend to hang around warehouses and industrial areas, where there also tend to be big trucks. If you or someone you know works in such a place – or lives where outdoor cats are occasional sights – spread the word about banging the side of your fist on the hoods of vehicles parked outside or tapping the horn – and waiting a minute to allow an animal to exit – before starting them. You just may save a life.

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