Heat Stroke Risks for K-9s
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Each year, the start of summer signifies pool parties, BBQs, and time with family and friends. However, it also indicates the rise in temperatures and heat-related injuries. Excessive heat plays havoc on even the healthiest of creatures, with this year being no exception. Often, excessive heat warnings plague sections of the country for days, with no end in sight. Risk of heatstroke increases for certain “vulnerable” populations (e.g., children, animals, elderly, and special needs individuals), which are often dependent upon others for assistance.

No one is immune from heat stroke or other heat-related injuries. However, risks increase in very young and the very old, those with compromised nervous systems, physical exertion in the heat, a lack of air conditioning, certain medical conditions, certain medications, and individuals not acclimated to heat exposure (Mayo Clinic, 2011). Though most attention is given to vulnerable human populations; animal populations are also vulnerable to heat-related injuries and death. In fact, thousands of animals die every year from heat-related injuries; most are the direct result of being left in over-heated, parked vehicles (Poling, 2010).

Being left for just 10 minutes in a parked car, on an 85-degree day can prove deadly. Temperatures inside can reach well over 100-degrees, and in 30 minutes time, well over 120-degrees (Healthy Pets, 2012). Brain damage occurs around 107-degrees and heat stroke around 109-degrees. Vulnerable pet populations are dependent on their owners for survival. Oftentimes, owners lack proper education about their pet’s ability to sweat and cool down. Some owners believe cracking a window in a vehicle provides adequate airflow to keep the animal cool. In fact, animals do not sweat like their human owners. Animals regulate body temperature through their mouth, nose, and paws. None of which can be regulated in a hot car with a window cracked (Healthy Pets, 2012).
Losing a pet is devastating; but what if you lost your partner? Fleck (n.d.) estimates anywhere from 12-18 police K-9s die each year as a result of over-heated vehicles (p. 1). The public’s view of police K-9s is that of a pet or departmental mascot. However, officers consider their four-legged counterparts as fellow officers, partners, and many times life savers. Losing a K-9 officer in the line-of-duty is devastating, but losing a K-9 to a seemingly preventable heat-related illness can be completely overwhelming, with some placing blame and pointing fingers.

Centralia, Illinois, K-9 Handler, Jamey Ramsey explained that the loss of a K-9 is devastating on many levels. The loss not only affects members of the community and department, but also the handler’s family. When asked how to reduce the number of K-9 heat-related injuries and deaths, Ramsey indicated, “It’s all about responsibility and vigilance...you must know your dog, your equipment, and your vehicle.” Ramsey further explained “...your K-9 might at some point save your life, in the process, sacrificing its own. This is what the K-9 is trained for...” However, it is each handler’s job to protect his or her K-9 partner that is completely dependent on their handler for survival.

Michael Mojzis, O’Fallon, Illinois K-9 Handler, reiterated Ramsey’s sentiment, adding that you have to know your dog’s limitations and know the signs and symptoms of heat-related illness. Mojzis further explained he reduces his K-9 Bobo’s risk of heat-related injury by keeping him well-hydrated and cool, not overworking him in the heat, using tinted windows, investing in a heat-alarm system, and popping the hood to keep the engine heat from transferring back into the vehicle. One of the most important things Officer Mojzis does to remain vigilant about his four-legged partner, is he is never far away from his vehicle and he has a note on the dash of his patrol vehicle, reminding him of Bobo’s presence. Mojzis stated that even though Bobo was his primary responsibility, fellow officers were also vigilant, notifying him if the heat-alarm was activated. Mojzis said this bond was not only because Bobo is a fellow officer, but because everyone is concerned for his wellbeing.

Numerous devices are marketed specifically for K-9s and handlers. Devices such as heat alarm systems; remote controlled unlocking systems; interior cages; and cooling vests, mats, and jackets. All of these products are wonderful. However, the chance of malfunction or human error is always present. In order to truly reduce the chances of heat-related injury or death of police K-9s, especially during the heat of summer, monitor them often and if possible; bring them into an air-conditioned environment.


References

Fleck, T. (n.d.). K-9s killed in overheated vehicles. Retrieved July 5, 2012, from: http://www.google.com/#hl=en&sclient=psy-ab&q=heat-related+police+k-9+deaths&oq=heat-related+police+k-9+deaths&gs_l=hp.3...57395.63615.3.63857.30.29.0.1.1.0.202.2961.21j7j1.29.0...0.0.Kz2TOQcOu30&pbx=1&bav=on.2,or.r_gc.r_pw.r_cp.r_qf.,cf.osb&fp=85ae98b99f31513&biw=1024&bih=728

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