



Pet Sunburn and Skin Cancer

Dermatology Service

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It is very important to protect our pet's skin from the sun. Ultraviolet rays can promote skin cancer in two different ways. It can damage the DNA in skin cells and weaken the body's natural defenses against cancer cells. UVB radiation causes sunburn while UVA rays penetrate deeper, tanning and aging skin - and both have been linked to skin cancer risk. For humans, the FDA is now requiring sunscreens to undergo the claim to be "broad spectrum" and protect against both UVA and UVB rays, and this is also important for pets.

Animals that have light-colored noses and thin or very short hairs are most in need of protection from the sun. The groin, inside legs, and belly also need sunscreen because hair is very thin and UV light can reflect off of concrete surfaces to affect the skin. Also, dogs who like to expose their belly to the sun and cats that like to spend time "sunbathing" at windows may need sunscreen. Pets with light skin and short or thin hair coat and pets who have suffered hair loss from allergies, hot spots, disease, surgical preparation, or radiation are particularly prone to sunburn or skin cancer. If your dog's coat is shaved so the dog is cooler during the summer, sunscreen may be helpful, but remember that sun can reflect back to the skin even in shaded areas. Keeping your pet in the shade can also help minimize the effects of sun on their skin. In pets, sunburn can appear as red skin or hair loss. Sunburn can irritate or exacerbate existing conditions. Skin cancer in dogs and cats can present in many different ways and may not be obvious to owners.

Sunscreen can be applied to the bridge of the nose, ear tips, skin surrounding the lips, and any area where pigmentation or skin color is low. The sunscreen should be fragrance free, non-staining, and contain UVA and UVB barriers similar to SPF 15 or SPF 30 for humans. The FDA has not established a test to determine SPF values in pets. Some protective ingredients include Ethylhexyl Methoxycinnamate, Octyl Salicylate, Homosalate and Benzophenone-3. Octyl Salicylate products should not be used on cats.

It is important to remember that you need to use plenty of sunscreen, and you should re-apply regularly during sun exposure. It is recommended to use about 1 tablespoon of lotion or cream for each body area treated! Sunscreen should be re-applied every 4-6 hours during the brightest time of the day from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm and every 2 hours if the animal is swimming.

There are a few sunscreens available specifically for pets. These include brands such as VetOne UVet Sunscreen Lotion or Spray SPF40 (for dogs, cats and horses) and Epi-Pet Sun Protector (not for use on cats). Baby sunscreen can also be used; however, most human sunscreens have ingestion warnings because the ingredients can be toxic if a child or dog ingests them, so if your pet is likely to lick it, look for a pet-specific sunscreen. Avoid products containing propylene glycol, triethanolamine, imidurea and parabens. Consult your veterinarian for specific sunscreen recommendations for your pet.