



## Press Release

# NEW RESEARCH REVEALS HOT WALKS ARE BIGGEST RISK OF HEAT-RELATED ILLNESS FOR DOGS

*As temperatures soar, experts warn of dangers of inappropriately exercising dogs especially if these are flat-faced breeds and offer advice on keeping your dog safe*

Dog owners, especially those of flat faced breeds such as English Bulldogs, Pugs and French Bulldogs, have been urged by a coalition of dog welfare experts and organisations, to take extra caution walking or exercising their pets in the heat, after new research reveals that exercise is by far the most common trigger for heat-related illness in dogs in the UK and that the risk is greater in flat-faced breeds.

The warning by the UK's Brachycephalic Working Group (BWG)\* comes after research from the VetCompass Programme at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) in collaboration with Nottingham Trent University shows that of the 'common trigger situations' for heat-related illness in dogs - such as exercise in the heat, hot weather, humidity and vehicle travel<sup>2</sup> - exercise in hot weather accounts for almost three quarters of heat-related illness cases (74 percent) seen by UK vets. More than one in ten cases (13 percent) are triggered by hot weather and 5 percent are as a result of dogs being confined in a vehicle.

Heat-related illness occurs when a dog can no longer maintain a safe body temperature, which can lead to tissue and organ damage and, in some cases, death. The illness can affect any type of dog, but certain breeds and types of dog, including brachycephalic dogs, are at increased risk. Over a third of owners of flat-faced (brachycephalic) dogs reported that heat regulation is a problem for their pet<sup>3</sup>. English Bulldogs are fourteen times more likely to suffer heat-related illness compared to Labrador Retrievers, whilst French Bulldogs are six times more likely<sup>1</sup>.

The research highlights the need for all dog owners, but especially those with flat-faced dogs, to think carefully about how to safely exercise their dogs during the warmer months.

### **Dr Dan O'Neill, Chair of the Brachycephalic Working Group said:**

"Owners have been alerted for years about the dangers of leaving dogs in cars especially in hot weather, but the latest VetCompass research at the RVC shows that it's not just bright sunshine and being confined in a vehicle that can cause heat-related illness. Factors such as over exertion and humidity also play very significant roles; it doesn't take a great amount of exercise to have potentially dangerous effects when the weather is hot or humid. In hotter weather, we urge owners to consider exercising their dogs in the early morning or late evenings when temperatures are cooler and to be especially careful with breeds that are flat-faced in order to avoid potentially devastating heat-related illness in their dogs.

"We have also put together information and advice on how to keep dogs cool and how to spot and deal with the early signs of over-heating should this occur – which include seeking early veterinary care and advice –to prevent the devastating situation where dogs get sick or die from serious forms of heat-related illness."

Dogs Trust, the UK's largest dog welfare charity, provided a Canine Welfare Grant for the recent UK research studies that are cited in the BWG position.

### **Paula Boyden, Dogs Trust Veterinary Director, said:**



“Dogs Trust has campaigned for many years on the ‘Hot Dogs’ issue, providing guidance to owners to help them look after their dogs in hot weather, but sadly every year we hear of dogs dying as a result of heatstroke. The findings of this research are so important in highlighting the impact of exercising dogs in hot weather.

“The research also showed the risks to dogs are much lower if heatstroke is detected and managed early. Therefore, raising awareness and knowledge of the early warning signs amongst owners, and encouraging prompt attention, will help avoid the heart-breaking situation of their dog becoming severely ill or dying as a result.”

In response to this new UK research, the BWG, made up of major stakeholders in dog welfare in the UK including The Kennel Club, PDSA, Dogs Trust, RSPCA, the Royal Veterinary College, the University of Cambridge, the British Veterinary Association, the British Small Animal Veterinary Association, Bulldog, French Bulldog and Pug breed clubs, and DEFRA has provided **top tips for owners on how to prevent, reduce and take action on heat-related illness in dogs:**

#### **What to do if overheating occurs**

- If you suspect your dog is suffering from heat-related illness, always seek veterinary advice as soon as possible.
- Know the early signs of heatstroke which include panting, difficulty breathing, tiredness, slow on a walk, less keen to play, drooling and vomiting and take immediate action. As soon as you spot these signs, stop exercising your dog, bring them inside into a cool area, give your dog water and seek veterinary advice immediately. Severe heatstroke can cause multiple seizures, complete loss of consciousness, loss of coordination, confusion and vomiting and diarrhoea with blood. If untreated it can prove fatal.
- Remove the source of over-heating e.g. stop exercise, seek shade, ensure air movement, remove the dog from hot environments e.g. cars.
- Wetting, soaking or water spray with air movement is most effective for rapid cooling. Make sure your dog does not inhale water during these procedures.

#### **How to prevent heat-related illness**

- Avoid walking or doing activities either indoors or outdoors with your dog at the hottest times of the day. Exercising dogs in the early morning or later in the evening is often safest.
- Ensuring your dogs are not overweight is important as obesity increases their risk of suffering heat-related illness.
- If you need to take your dog out in the car, even if travelling a short distance, avoid travelling during the hottest times of the day and plan for possible delays by having access to water, shade, ventilation and enhanced air-flow (e.g. fans).
- Never leave your dog in a vehicle on a warm day, even with a window open. Stationary vehicles can rise rapidly in internal temperature and lead to fatal heat-related illness.
- Avoid dogs being in direct sunlight during travel e.g. provide window shades.



### **Keeping dogs cool**

- Use a cooling mat or wrap an ice pack or frozen water bottle in a tea towel for your pet to lie on.
- Use cold treats from the fridge for added moisture or make an ice lolly from pet-friendly ingredients.
- Always take plenty of water with you when out with your dog and make sure they have access to fresh water at home at all times.
- Consider attaching the lead to a walking harness rather than directly to the collar during exercise. Leads that pull on a collar can compress the airways and therefore exacerbate breathing difficulties in brachycephalic dogs as well as impairing the cooling effects from panting
- Be particularly cautious exercising unfit dogs in warm or humid weather because they do not cool as effectively
- Tarmac can get very hot in the sun – check it with your hand before letting your dog walk on it so they don't burn their paws. Try the 'seven-second test' – if it's too hot for your hand, it's too hot for your dog's paws

**ENDS**

### **Notes to Editors**

The full position statement can be read here: <http://www.ukbwg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/210609-BWG-Position-Statement-Heat-related-illness-in-dogs.pdf>

A colorful infographic on heat-related illness in dogs is available at [http://www.ukbwg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/210618-BWG-HRI-infographic\\_updated.pdf](http://www.ukbwg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/210618-BWG-HRI-infographic_updated.pdf)

For more information contact [pressoffice@dogstrust.org.uk](mailto:pressoffice@dogstrust.org.uk)

### **\*About the Brachycephalic Working Group (BWG) [www.ukbwg.org.uk](http://www.ukbwg.org.uk)**

The BWG comprises leading UK dog welfare bodies, veterinary organisations, scientific & social researchers and breed clubs. The group aims to improve the health and welfare of brachycephalic (flat faced) dogs by working together to improve the conformation-related health of individual dogs as well as reducing the current trend towards rising demand for these dogs. These aims are being approached by a series of actions that target the brachycephalic welfare issue at several points.

The BWG includes representatives of all major stakeholders in dog welfare in the UK. These include:

- Academia – Royal Veterinary College, University of Cambridge
- Breed clubs – Bulldog, French Bulldog, Pug
- Veterinary profession – British Veterinary Association (BVA), British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA)
- The Kennel Club
- DEFRA
- Animal charities – Dogs Trust, PDSA, RSPCA
- Owners, breeders, Veterinary surgeons



## Research references

1. Brachycephalic breeds overall are more than twice as likely to suffer heat-related illness compared with mesocephalic (medium skull shapes) breeds: Hall EJ, Carter AJ, O'Neill DG. Incidence and risk factors for heat-related illness (heatstroke) in UK dogs under primary veterinary care in 2016. *Scientific Reports*. 2020;10(1):9128. Certain brachycephalic breeds are at especially high risk of heat-related illness compared to Labrador Retrievers (3).

- a. (English) Bulldog: **14 x** risk compared to Labrador Retrievers
- b. French Bulldog: **6 x** risk compared to Labrador Retrievers
- c. Dogue de Bordeaux: **5 x** risk compared to Labrador Retrievers
- d. Cavalier King Charles Spaniel: **3 x** risk compared to Labrador Retrievers
- e. Pug: **3 x** risk compared to Labrador Retrievers

2. Hall EJ, Carter AJ, O'Neill DG. Dogs Don't Die Just in Hot Cars—Exertional Heat-Related Illness (Heatstroke) Is a Greater Threat to UK Dogs. *Animals*. 2020;10(8):1324:

The most common triggers for heat-related illness in dogs in the UK are:

- a. Exercise (exertional): 74.2% of events
- b. Environmental (hot weather): 12.9% of events
- c. Vehicular confinement: 5.2% of events

3. Packer RMA, O'Neill DG, Fletcher F, Farnworth MJ. Great expectations, inconvenient truths, and the paradoxes of the dog-owner relationship for owners of brachycephalic dogs. *PLOS ONE*. 2019;14(7):e0219918.

4. Kennel Club breed registration figures and percentage increases for the three most popular brachycephalic breeds, broken down by recent decades, and from 2019 to 2020

5. Hall EJ, Carter AJ, Bradbury J, Barfield D, O'Neill DG. Proposing the VetCompass clinical grading tool for heat-related illness in dogs. *Scientific Reports*. 2021;11(1):6828.