

SEVEN THINGS THAT CAN KILL (OR SEVERELY SICKEN) YOUR DOG OR CAT

With the holiday season rapidly approaching, one of the last things a person or a family needs to do is to make an emergency visit to their veterinarian because of a sick pet. Even though it is impossible to list all of the thousands of things that can cause harm to our cats and dogs in this short report, my hope is that by highlighting a few of the more common problems I see or hear about in my veterinary practice every year around the winter holiday season, that I can help save your pets any unnecessary misery—or perhaps even save their lives. Not to mention that, in these financially difficult times, such emergency visits often cost a huge amount of money.

One of the most important ideas to keep in mind is that the holiday seasons are an exciting but at the same time a mysterious and often stressful time of the year for our pets. Beginning around Thanksgiving, there is this sudden unexplained bounty of delicious new foods and enticing smells. There are often new or seldom seen people visiting their homes who, our pets quickly discover, will slip them delicious treats under the table in order to make friends with them.

And then there is the wondrous, chaotic, and blessed joy of the Christmas holidays. Now, besides all of the wonderful foods and dishes of candies, there are strange boxes called presents and unusual flowers. There is also something called a Christmas tree! What a wonderful world it must be if you're a doggie or a kitty.

1. CHOCOLATE

Of all of the emergency calls I get from pet owners during all hours of the day and night, one of the most common involves dogs (mostly) and their intentional or accidental eating of chocolate. From brownies to chocolate fudge cake mixes, from Hershey's Kisses to imported Belgian chocolate-covered cherries, everyone wants to know, "Doc, can chocolate kill my dog?" The answer is, "Depending on how much they ate, yes, yes, yes. It can!"

As I've told my readers many times before, dogs and cats are not just furry, four-legged, miniature people. Their body organs and metabolisms are far, far different than ours. A dog's ability to digest chocolate is a good example of this difference. Chocolate contains a compound called theobromine, which can be lethal to dogs. Our human bodies can eliminate the theobromine that's in chocolate in three to four hours. Dogs, on the other hand, can take up to eighteen hours to accomplish the same task. And therein lies the problem: the longer theobromine stays in our pets' bodies, the more damage it does.

The amount of chocolate needed to cause serious harm varies according to the size of the dog, her age, his overall health, and—very, very importantly—the type of chocolate they've consumed. Also, because no one has ever done a controlled study to learn exactly how much is needed to kill dogs, there is a large range of numbers with regards to what is and what is not a deadly dose.

In my practice, when a concerned client phones me regarding their pet's chocolate consumption, **as a quick and approximate way to calculate** whether drastic action should be taken, I consider a potentially lethal dose to be five ounces of pure baker's chocolate to kill a 45 pound dog. This figure is only a rule of thumb and often needs to be adjusted according to the actual or estimated type of chocolate candy that's been consumed.

More or less, this work out to:

- For candy bar type milk chocolate: one ounce per one pound of a dog's body weight.
- For semisweet chocolate: one ounce per three pounds of body weight.
- For baker's chocolate: one ounce per nine pounds of body weight.

For worried and frantic pet owners whose dogs have just eaten some form of chocolate, only your pet's veterinarian should make the final decision as to whether a lethal dose of chocolate has been

Most of the clinical signs we veterinarians see in chocolate toxicity involve the nervous system, cardiovascular system, and the gastrointestinal tract. Early signs we see in dogs are an unexplained uneasiness, hyperactivity, muscle twitching, vomiting, diarrhea, and excessive panting. Because chocolate can act like a diuretic, there will often be an increase in urination. If left untreated, these signs can lead to a drastic increase in body temperature, seizures, coma, and the most feared of all, **SUDDEN DEATH!**

There is no precise antidote for chocolate poisoning. If you know (or strongly suspect) your dog has consumed chocolate, you must call your veterinarian immediately. When people call my veterinary clinic, the first thing I try to determine is whether or not the pet has consumed a potentially deadly dose. If we decide the dog did eat a lethal amount, or if the owner and I can't come to a definite conclusion regarding the problem, the first thing I do is coach the owners on getting the dog to vomit. **VOMITING IS ONLY REALLY EFFECTIVE WITHIN THE FIRST ONE TO TWO HOURS AFTER THE PET CONSUMES THE CHOCOLATE.**

Afterwards, I have them bring the dog in to the office so that I can administer activated charcoal in order to absorb as much of the theobromine as possible from the stomach and intestines. If the dog is showing signs of chocolate poisoning, I'll keep him in the hospital for observation or refer her to an emergency center. Anticonvulsants, oxygen therapy, fluid therapy, and intravenous medications may also be needed control neurologic signs and to protect the animal's vital organs.

In closing, remember that timing is critical. As soon as you know or suspect your dog has eaten chocolate, call your veterinarian.

2. THE HOLIDAY MEALS

Every year, beginning around one week before Thanksgiving and lasting until about a week after New Year's, I see a huge increase in really, *really* sick dogs (mostly) and cats (infrequently.) These poor critters are really hurting! They all are vomiting—retching would be a better term—some have diarrhea, and most have so much pain in their abdomens that they have to stand in a stiff, straight-legged, sawhorse stance. Almost all of them have an acknowledged recent history of what we veterinarians call *dietary indiscretion*. That is, these dogs and cats consumed either purposely, accidentally, or by their own covert efforts more of something that they normally eat or consumed something that they should not have eaten at all! When a client

brings in their sick pet, the two big categories of diseases that first come to my mind are acute pancreatitis and enteritis.

Acute pancreatitis is a tough disease for me to explain to pet owners, and it's an even tougher disease for me as a veterinarian to precisely diagnose. The word *acute* means that the disease comes on suddenly. (There is a chronic form of pancreatitis as well.) The pancreas is the body's organ that is responsible for producing and secreting the digestive enzymes (juices) needed to digest whatever a dog—and all other animals, including ourselves—eats. (For the sake of this discussion, I'm limiting the function of the pancreas to its digestive function; in reality, it really does a *whole* lot more.)

In the disease pancreatitis, for some reason, **and medical science doesn't know for sure why**, the pancreas releases its storage of digestive juices way too soon before they're needed for digestion. This early release of these very powerful digestive juices then causes the pancreas to auto-digest (eat itself up). This leads to the signs of severe vomiting and tremendous abdominal pain that I see in these poor animals.

The temptation of many pet owners is to blame the poor turkey for making their pet sick. This is entirely unfair to the poor turkey! It would be like blaming your refrigerator for making you nauseous because you consumed a half gallon container of Ben & Jerry's French vanilla ice cream after just eating Grandma's kielbasa and sauerkraut casserole. The problem is not the turkey itself (although there is some disagreement about this), but rather the over-consumption of the meat and its discarded wastes (fat, skin, bones, etc.), as well as all of the other holiday trimmings that go with the sumptuous meals. This happens in three common ways.

The family's innocent "accidental" actions. This is probably the biggest cause. Being the eternal opportunist when it comes to getting food, the scenario usually works something like this. The whole family is sitting around the festive and bountiful holiday dinner table. Even though your own immediate family would never fall to the temptation of feeding the dog while they're eating, beloved Grandpa, unable to resist the longing in Rover's brown eyes, slips him a chunk of turkey skin unseen under the table. A few minutes later, sweet little niece Heather, because she thinks it quite an exciting thing to do, sneaks the dog a big chunk of spicy stuffing. Shortly later, little cousin Billy accidentally knocks over his plate of mashed potatoes with gravy, and Rover, being the good dog that he is, speeds to the rescue and licks the mess up. And on and on, until the poor beast is stuffed with a ton of foodstuffs he is not used to eating.

The owner's intentional actions. It is human nature not to waste food. Along with the holiday meals, be they turkey, hams, lamb, or whatever, there are always "parts" that can't be used: skin, fat, bones, miscellaneous uneaten organs, etc. Who better to give all of this stuff to but the dog or cat. And this is where one of the great mysteries of acute pancreatitis comes into play. When I ask the owner of a pet that I suspect has acute pancreatitis why they fed their dogs the food scraps, they almost always say, "But Doc, I've always done it in the past, and nothing ever went wrong before!"

That's the mystery! For reasons unknown, an owner can give their pet the turkey skin or the fat off of the ham a hundred times, and nothing happens. At least nothing they can detect. But, again, for reasons unknown, on the one hundred and first time, the dog's pancreas gets angry and inflamed and makes the poor critter sick.

The dog's own covert actions. Just like in the “accidental” scenario mentioned a couple of paragraphs above, a great many times the dog is not innocent in his/her own cause of illness. The smell of the holiday feasts are not just alluring to us. Can you imagine the sensation of our banquets to an animal who has over one hundred times the sense of smell as our dogs do? They just can't help themselves from doing all they can to get a little of the action.

As I previously mentioned, acute pancreatitis is a very difficult disease to pin down. Signs of the disease are vomiting, loss of appetite, diarrhea, lethargy, unwillingness to move, abdominal pain, and sometimes fever. Mild cases of the disease usually pass in a day. But if you know—or strongly suspect—that the dog or cat really made a glutton of themselves, then he/she should be taken to the vet. It must be kept in mind that occasionally, pancreatitis can be fatal.

The other big category of diseases that occurs around the holidays in conjunction with our holiday feasts besides acute pancreatitis are the various types of enteritis. Put very simply, enteritis is just a medical term for any infection or inflammation (irritation) of the digestive tract, the “guts” if you will. If the infection or irritation is in the stomach, it's called gastritis; if it's in the upper GI tract, it's called duodenitis; if it's in the large intestine, it's called colitis. These are identical to the food poisonings we hear about on the news when people get sick after eating bad tomatoes, spinach, or an occasional hamburger. And just like acute pancreatitis, some enteritis infections can be fatal.

Dogs (mostly) and cats can acquire these infections the same way we do: by eating something contaminated by infectious organisms such as bacteria, viruses, or the various parasites. One of the biggest culprits for our pets is the same as for us: raw, poorly cooked, or inappropriately stored foodstuffs, especially the meats. That raw turkey sitting out on the top of the stove unattended while you answer the telephone is a great temptation to your dog or cat. And we must not forget about the discarded bones and scraps sitting in the garbage for several days or carelessly tossed out upon the compost heap.

The symptoms of the various intestinal infections are very similar to those mentioned before with acute pancreatitis: vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, profound lethargy, and no appetite. It's even possible to have both diseases happening at the same time! In most cases, supportive care, antibiotics, and some simple dietary modifications are all that will be needed to help your pet get well. Occasionally, however, whatever your dog or cat has eaten may contain a really life-threatening organism such as a Clostridium or E. coli bacteria that, even if attended to quickly, can be agonizingly fatal.

3. THE CHRISTMAS TREE AND ASSOCIATED HOLIDAY DECORATIONS

After the veritable cornucopia of delicious and enticing foods, the next largest source of excitement for our dogs and cats has to be the Christmas tree and all of the exciting things associated with it. In the case of a natural tree, there are great-smelling saps and bark and needles to lick, there are suddenly lots of exciting shiny, hanging-down things to bat around and gnaw upon, and, to the pet's great delight, there is also a new “water bowl” at the base of this tree from which they can sneak an occasional drink as well. Artificial trees, with the exception of the water bowl, are subject to the same dangers as the natural trees.

With regards to how to prevent complications involving dogs and cats and Christmas trees, my advice is to prevent them from going near the tree at all costs; there is no good that can come from the pet's encounter with the tree.

I know, of course, that even as I write these very words, no one ever listens to me.

There are hundreds of hazards that can potentially exist in a pet's encounter with a Christmas tree, and it is impossible to list them all. Hands down, the biggest problem I see involving the Christmas tree are cats (mostly) and dogs consuming the tinsel. For reasons that exist only in their little kitty and doggie minds, these guys love to lick, suck on, and swallow these tiny strips of shiny metal or plastic. Besides the potential danger of absorbing the heavy metals on these tin or lead-coated tinsels, the biggest danger is them getting stuck in the pet's intestinal tract, causing what we veterinarians call an intestinal blockage. I can't recall a Christmas season going by without having to remove a strand of tinsel dangling out of a cat's butt. Please keep in mind that ribbon, package string, the strings from the family pot roast, strands of popcorn, etc. all can cause blockages.

One of the biggest problems in diagnosing an intestinal blockage is that in the early stage of the disease, the symptoms look the same as those mentioned in acute pancreatitis and enteritis: vomiting, abdominal pain, fever, lethargy, not eating. And then there is the expense! Doing a thorough diagnostic work up (blood work, ultrasound, x-rays, abdominal exploratory, barium swallows) in the search to rule out an intestinal blockage cost a lot of money at a time of the year most pet owners are already over-extended financially. Then there is the huge price of surgery to remove the blockage! In my small rural practice, when there is no known history of the pet swallowing something they shouldn't have, and if the owner's budget prevents them from having a complete abdominal work up, then a lot of times it's a judgment call to just wait and see what happens. If the pet's problem was something other than a blockage—or if the blockage passes—then the animal is saved a lot of unnecessary trauma; however, if the cat or dog's problem is an intestinal blockage, then the extra hours of waiting dramatically increase their risk of death.

Another common problem is the dog (mostly) confusing a Christmas tree ornament with a ball. Many ornaments are round, shiny, and generally irresistible for a dog, especially a puppy, to scoop up in their mouths. If the ornaments are of the older-style glass type, then usually they'll break in the pet's mouth. A larger concern would be if they are of a tougher plastic construction. If the poor dog swallows one of these, the ornament will have to be removed surgically before it leads to a blockage. Also, those bubbling-type ornaments sometimes contain potentially toxic methylene chloride.

A rather uncommon—but very serious—cause of death for a dog or cat are all of the Christmas tree light electrical strands and extension cords. These can cause real heartbreak either by electrocution or accidental strangulation. The sharpness of a pet's fang, especially a cat's, makes it pretty simple for them to penetrate the plastic wire coatings of the modern-day lighting strands.

One final aspect of the Christmas tree I'd like to mention is that of the water bowl at the base used by people to keep the tree from drying out. Here is an absolute truism: Your pet can have every one of their regular bowls in the house full to the brim with cool, clean, fresh, water, but for reasons completely unknown, they **gotta** drink out of the Christmas tree water bowl.

Maybe it's the forbiddenness of it all. Even though people will tell you that their pet drinks from the tree's bowl all the time, it shouldn't be so! Tree sap and foliage dyes can leach into the water. Short, sharp pine needles can get sucked up by your pet and lodge in his throat. Bacteria from stagnation can pollute the water. Although most tree-longevity additives are nontoxic, some **do** contain fertilizer, aspirin (very toxic to cats), or bizarre sugars. Consciously letting your pet drink from the Christmas tree watering bowl is just asking for trouble.

4. GRAPES AND RAISINS

The fact that grapes and, especially, raisins can be toxic to our dogs and cats is quite surprising to many people. Their first response is usually that they've been feeding the occasional grape or raisin for years to their pets and have had no trouble. And, of course, my answer to this is that even though our pets should, at least in theory, only eat dog or cat food, the occasional food treat (in very small quantities) mostly will do no harm. But now that you know better, and from now on: **NEVER FEED ANY GRAPES OR RAISINS TO YOUR PETS AGAIN!** I know that this is a pretty strong statement, but in my research for this report, I found one case where as few as seven raisins may have killed a dog.

Besides the willful act of giving grapes or raisins to our pets as treats, owners must keep in mind unintentional sources of these fruits (raisins are the worst) that our dogs and cats can consume.

There are the boxes of raisins in children's school lunches that are often thrown out or intentionally given to the dog to eat. There is the double whammy of the partially eaten box of Raisinettes that you brought home from the movie theater. In keeping with the spirit of this report, please keep in mind that during the holidays, there are the various pies and pastries that must be paid attention to. And let's not forget the great affliction that all year long lurks in the shadowy background of our innocent lives and only raises its sinister head around Christmas: **Great Aunt Mildred's raisin-filled fruitcake!**

All grapes, both with seeds or seedless, white or purple, organic or not, have been found to be harmful. The toxic component is still not known. The cause of death in fatal cases is kidney failure. The only report I found regarding how many grapes or raisins you need to cause clinical signs are:

- Three and a half ounces of grapes per ten pounds of dog.
- A half an ounce of raisins, per 10 pounds of dog.

Because of the severity of the toxicity, and the mystery surrounding the actual cause of this toxicity, my strong recommendation to my clients is to start treatment immediately if any quantity of these fruits are consumed!

Signs seen in mild cases are vomiting, diarrhea, and loss of appetite. In severe cases, the pet develops a progressive weakness, has possible abdominal pain, and begins to drink and urinate excessively. At this time, grape skins and partially digested raisins may be seen in the

vomit or feces. In the most severe of cases, the kidneys shut down completely and the pet stops urinating.

Because the cause of toxicity is unknown, there is no known antidote. Suspected grape or raisin ingestion must be tended to immediately by a veterinarian. In my practice, if the consumption has just occurred, I would coach the pet owners into getting the animal to vomit. I would then have them bring the pet in for treatment with activated charcoal. In advanced cases of grape or raisin poisoning, or in cases where it has been over two hours since the pet ate the grapes or raisins, intensive supportive care in a full-service veterinary hospital is the pet's only hope. And even with the best of care, the prognosis for successful recovery is poor.

5) ALCOHOL POISONING

“Tis the season to be jolly.” “A toast to the New Year!” Along with all of the overeating and gift-giving that comes with our holiday season comes the increased consumption of adult beverages, i.e., alcoholic drinks. And just like every other type of mischief your beloved pets can get into during the holiday festivities, the drinking of beverages containing alcohol can be a life-threatening problem for them as well. The problem can show itself in two ways.

The first is alcohol's effect on the health and well-being of the pet (mostly dogs). Pet owners and their guests usually forget to take into consideration that dogs are significantly lighter in body weight than humans. The twelve-ounce glass of spiked eggnog that causes 140-pound Aunt Debbie to dance naked on the dining room table can potentially kill 40-pound Clyde the basset hound.

Because they are mostly an acquired taste for humans, it is unlikely that a dog or cat will intentionally drink straight hard liquors such as whiskey, scotch, or rum. The problem comes into play when we combine these beverages with sweet mixers like Coca-Cola or fruit juice. One of the biggest culprits of alcohol poisoning in our pets is identical to the same problem in humans: bingeing. That is, pets being intentionally or maliciously tricked into consumption/over-consumption because some moron was bored or needed a good laugh.

Determining if an animal is suffering from alcohol poisoning is most often based on clinical signs and the pet's history of having consumed alcoholic beverages. Calculating the amount of alcohol a pet has to drink before they become sickened is not an exact science, mostly because hard numbers are not really available. One number I found in my research is five to eight milliliters of pure alcohol per kilogram (2.2 pounds) of dog. Also, just as in humans, there is large range of tolerances to alcohol.

This is where the biggest difficulty comes in. Although I go on record and say unequivocally that you should never, ever give your pet an alcoholic drink, I realize that we live in a world where poop happens. Having said that, I'll say that it is unlikely that much harm will occur if a pet has the occasional accidental little nip. But keep in mind the following couple of approximate calculations: A twelve-ounce can of 5 % beer would equal approximately eighteen milliliters of alcohol. This could kill a ten pound Labrador puppy. Or, two ounces of eighty proof vodka mixed with a cup of eggnog would be about twenty-four milliliters of pure alcohol, which could potentially kill a thirty-pound Sheltie.

Signs of mild alcohol poisoning are similar to those seen in humans. They are unsteady in their walking, have a lack of inhibition, and are slow to respond to stimuli. If the animal has

drunk a lethal amount, they will go into a coma and often suffer from cardiac arrest. Early veterinary care usually results in a good outcome.

Before leaving the topic, a second problem—and a potentially more serious one—regarding alcohol consumption and your pet is that of inhibiting his or her inhibitions. That may sound confusing, but think back to the example I gave of Aunt Debbie dancing naked on the dining room table. One of the reasons our pets (mostly dogs again) don't do bad things like bite or run away or tear up furniture is that they are inhibited from doing so by temperament and training. When you lower this inhibition by alcohol or other drugs, your “nice” doggie could potentially turn into a biting and snarling (as we vets say) land shark. When this happens, you and your family and guests could get seriously hurt.

6. HOLIDAY PLANTS

Along with everything else our poor pets have to contend with during our holiday season, it is important as well to keep in mind our festive holiday plants. I'll mention a few of the more common problematic plants, but it must be kept in mind that a complete list would fill volumes. Also, in most cases, the toxicity of the plants depends on the size of the pet, the amount of the plant material they've eaten, and which part of the plant was consumed. Likewise, treatment varies with each plant, and so always, always, always consult your pet's best friend (next to yourselves, of course), his or her veterinarian.

- **Poinsettia:** This most-recognized of Christmas plants is a little bit controversial with regards to its toxicity. I learned in vet school that the entire plant was potentially harmful if eaten by a cat or dog. However, because of hybridization and selective breeding, the floral industry claims this is no longer so. Since the plant's sap can be an irritant, the clinical signs we see in our pets would be those of oral discomfort: pawing at the mouth and possible hypersalivating. Because of the potential for problems, my recommendation is to keep your pets away from the plant as much as humanly possible.

- **American mistletoe:** Fatal poisoning is rare and seems to be limited to eating the berries. In mild cases, pets mostly experience signs of digestive system upset such as diarrhea, vomiting, and hypersalivating. Severe cases can cause shock and sudden death.

- **Holly:** Same as American mistletoe.

- **Daffodils, narcissi, tulips, autumn crocuses, and most other forced bulb plants:** All parts of the plants are toxic to some degree; however, we see the greatest poisonings when the pet (dogs mostly) eats the bulbs. Signs of mild ingestion include vomiting, lethargy, painful abdomen, and diarrhea. Consuming large amounts can result in collapse and occasional sudden death.

- **Lilies:** The whole of these plants are extremely toxic. Cats seem to be the most sensitive. Symptoms include not eating, vomiting, and profound lethargy. If you know for sure your pet has eaten any part of a lily, you must seek veterinary care. Death can occur due to kidney failure.

- **Amaryllis:** The bulb is the most toxic part of the plant. There is disagreement as to whether the flowers, leaves, or stems are also poisonous. As I've said before, just to be safe, it's best not to let your dog or cat eat near these plants.

In closing this section, if you know or suspect your dog or cat has consumed any part of a holiday—or any other plant for that matter—please call his or her veterinarian, or any poison control center.

- **American Association of Poison Control Centers: 1-800-222-1222**
- **ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center: 1-888-426-4435**

7. ALL OF THE OTHER STUFF MOST PEOPLE DON'T THINK ABOUT

The list of items that can harm or kill your pet is infinite. But with an owner's common sense and constant vigilance, the holiday season can be one of joy and excitement for all. As yet just one more reminder, along with our holidays come lots of new and exciting things and experiences for our pets. Dogs and cats are curious about anything new in their homes just as children of all ages are, and if not prevented from doing so, they will investigate any changes. Just like us, they will touch, sniff, and, unlike us, taste anything that's new to their experience. So please, pay attention. Although far from complete, here are a few more things to pay attention to: Christmas candles and scented oils, onions, bread dough, seasonal medications, antifreeze, deicing products, batteries, tylenol, macadamia nuts, and many, many more.