

PETS AND THE HOLIDAYS

BY: LAURA BOND

The holiday season brings excitement, commotion and in all, the activities of the season, our beloved pets may be exposed to hazards less commonly found at other times of the year. While you are busy making your festive plans for Thanksgiving, Hanukkah and Christmas, please don't forget to include your pets. Though the season is a time for giving there are some things you should not share with your pets. Your furry little family members may be greatly intrigued by the new sites, smells and tastes but once you know the hazards, a little precaution and prevention will help to make the holidays run a little smoother.

The following are some of the most common health concerns for your pet during the holidays:



1. Tinsel, Ribbon and other pretty, glittery, dangling things

Ribbon, wrapping paper, ornaments, tinsel, extension cords and gifts may be especially appealing to your pet as "chew toys". When ingested, things such as ribbon, tinsel etc can be very serious. The ingestion of tinsel can be deadly. Eating tinsel or other string like items such as ribbon can cause serious damage to the intestines. Pets with linear foreign bodies quickly become ill with signs including: vomiting, diarrhea, depression, belly pain and sometimes fever. If a foreign body does become lodged, surgery is required to remove it. Sharp or breakable ornaments, dreidels and even aluminum foil should also be kept out of reach of pets.

2. Christmas Lights and Extension Cords



Chewing on Christmas lights can be a temptation for some critters, the same with extension cords. This can cause them to get shocked. This can occur from defective cords and from a pet chewing on them. Both indoor and outdoor lights should be carefully examined to ensure safety for your household pets. Check cords for signs of bite marks, loose frayed wires, proximity to the tree's water supply or evidence of short circuits. Be sure all cords are secured and out of the way.

Electrical shock can cause burns, difficulty breathing, abnormal heart rhythm, loss of consciousness, and death. Call a veterinarian immediately if your pet has been injured by electrical shock. Treatment will be most effective if begun soon after shock.

3. Christmas Trees, Holiday Plants, Potpourri and Candles



If you are going to be putting up a Christmas tree, make sure it is well secured. Watch that your pet is not eating the needles. Ingested pine needles can puncture your pet's intestines if sharp enough. Also watch that your pet is not drinking the tree water which often times contains preservatives. This can cause gastric upset. Either make it inaccessible to your pet or just don't use it at all. Avoid using sugar and aspirin additives in your tree water altogether. If you add chemicals to the water be sure to read the label to make sure it is safe for your pet.

Holly and mistletoe are extremely poisonous to your pets and prove to be quite dangerous when eaten. Mistletoe can cause vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, muscle tremors, trouble breathing, seizures and shock. Depending on how much is eaten, Mistletoe can cause death. Holly berries can cause severe gastrointestinal disturbances and depression of the nervous system. Always seek veterinary care in the case of poisoning.

The Pointsettia has received bad publicity in the past where it may not be truly poisonous. It's sap, which is milky white in color, and it's leaves can certainly cause severe gastric distress. They can irritate the mouth but if signs develop they are usually mild. However, with so many hybrid varieties available, the best approach is to keep plants out of your pet's reach.

Potpourri may make your house smell festive but may also be another attraction for pets to try to drink from or eat. Make sure that potpourri pots are covered and out of your pet's reach.

Lighted candles should never be left unattended. This is even more important if they are placed at your pet's eye level. Anchor candles away from curious faces and feet. Hot wax and open flames can quickly become disastrous.

4. Bones, Fat, Chocolate and Overindulgence

Well-intentioned family and friends may share holiday foods with your pet or their own pet thinking they are giving “just a little treat”. However, these “treats” can wreak havoc on a pet’s sensitive system. Holiday favorites can cause the pet to develop a stomach upset or worse, pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas) which can be caused by eating fatty foods. Foods too rich, too fatty or too spicy - or anything your pet is not used to - can trigger a bout of intestinal upset.

The holiday turkey or chicken will leave a lot of tantalizing bones, but do NOT feed them to your pet. Also, beware of steak bones. Small bones or bone chips can lodge in the throat, stomach and intestinal tract.

Steer clear from feeding your pet gravies, poultry skin, and anything cooked in oil. These foods can also cause severe gastrointestinal upset.

What would the holidays be without boxes of chocolate and hot cocoa? However, as most people know, chocolate can be toxic and even fatal to dogs and cats. Whether your pet gets a hold of a box of Christmas chocolates or it is given as a treat it is not a good thing. Chocolate poisoning occurs most frequently in dogs but other species are susceptible also. Theobromine is the toxic compound found in chocolate. Signs which may appear within 1 to 4 hours of eating chocolate include:

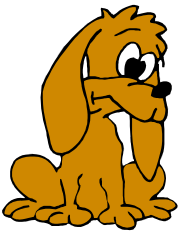
- Vomiting
- Increased thirst
- Diarrhea
- Weakness
- Difficulty keeping balance
- Hyperexcitability
- Muscle spasms, seizures, coma
- Death from abnormal heart rhythm



The toxicity of chocolate depends on the amount and type of chocolate ingested. The toxic level of milk chocolate is about 1 oz for every pound of body weight. The toxic level of Baker’s chocolate is 1/4 oz per pound of body weight. As with any poisoning call your veterinarian or emergency veterinary hospital immediately. Have the product label information available when you call. The sooner treatment can start the better.

5. Stress and Company

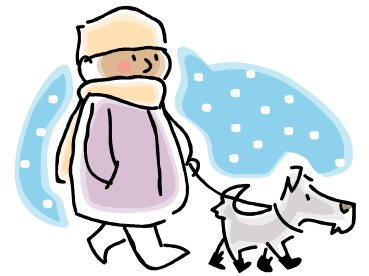
With everyone coming and going, watch out for open doors and sneaky pets. Make sure your pets have collars and tags in case of escape. Also, remind your guests that sometimes your normally friendly dog or cat may be less than willing to deal with excited, enthusiastic children and rooms full of unfamiliar people. Provide a special quiet place with a blanket and fresh water for your pets to retreat to when the festivities get too stressful.



6. Cold Weather

Unseasonably cold weather means it’s time to give special attention to your pets, both indoor and outdoor. When temperatures reach extremely cold levels, it’s time to give your outdoor cat and dog a break and invite them in, even if it’s in the garage. By “inside” that does not mean letting cats and dogs in and out of a warm house from night to day. Creating an abrupt temperature contrast can increase the risk of some infectious diseases. Consider housing them in the shelter of a well built doghouse or bringing them into a shed or garage. Outdoor cats will seek warmth and sometimes this includes near or on a car engine.

This means that if they do not move when you go to start the engine, they could be seriously injured or even killed. Before starting the engine, tap on the hood a couple times to chase them off. Another weather related hazard is the salt used on snowy or icy days. When ingested, it can cause inflammation of the digestive tract. That is why it is important to wipe your dog’s feet when he comes in. You could even do this for your cat. It is when your pet grooms himself that he is likely to ingest the salt. Lastly, keep an eye on your pet’s outside water. Remember, if it is cold enough it will freeze. Ice is not a substitute for clean water.



7. Emergency Contact

ASPCA Poison Control 1 (800) 548-2423 or 1 (888) 426-4435

For more information about caring for your pets go to www.asPCA.org