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10 Holiday Tips to Keep Pets Safe

By Clinician's Brief
December 7, 2009

Whether you celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or Ramadan, one thing that all of these celebrations have in common is that they can spell disaster for pets. According to the *Journal of Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care*, emergency visits for cats and dogs go up significantly during the holiday season. Below, our tips for keeping pets safe during the season of festive fetes, indulgent foods, and gift wrap.

Top 10 Holiday Hazards

- 1. Ribbon and wrapping supplies:** To cats and dogs, that snowflake ribbon you were planning on using for Aunt Betty's Hanukkah gift just looks like a toy. Make sure that you designate a special closet or sealed container in which to place wrapping supplies. Ingested ribbon can cause intestinal obstruction or bunching of the intestine, conditions that could be fatal. If you place gifts underneath a Christmas tree, make sure that they are ribbon-free or wait until Christmas morning to put them out. Avoid tying ribbon around your pet's neck for the same reason.
- 2. Chocolate, coffee, tea, grapes/raisins, xylitol:** Grandma's baked goods have a place in your home during the holidays--just make sure those treats are stored where animals cannot reach them. Chocolate, coffee, and tea contain theobromine, an ingredient that's extremely toxic to pets. Be especially careful of dark chocolate and unsweetened baking chocolate, which contain the highest doses of theobromine. Grapes are a common item on holiday cheese platters, while raisins often find their way into cookies and breads. Beware: both are toxic to dogs and can cause acute renal failure. Xylitol, a sugar substitute often found in chewing gum, mints, and candies, is also toxic to dogs. As it gains popularity among the health-conscious public, it is also found in more homemade baked goods. It can cause vomiting, internal hemorrhaging, and liver failure. Hosting a party? Be sure to place foods on tables and counters that are too high for animals to access. Likewise, don't place boxes of wrapped chocolate or food of any kind under the Christmas tree. Sparky will likely wait for you to leave the house and then unwrap a few presents of his own.
- 3. Raw Dough/Unbaked Bread:** Raw dough that contains yeast can "rise" once a pet ingests it, causing gas to build up in its digestive tract. Not only is this highly uncomfortable, but it can also cause the stomach and intestines to rupture from the pressure.
- 4. Antifreeze:** During the cold months, antifreeze is often found dripping onto a garage floor or driveway. Just a lick or two could result in death for your pet. Although animals do find it tasty, even pets that don't "get into things" can walk through it and accidentally lick their paws. Antifreeze causes kidney failure and it only takes 1-2 teaspoons to kill a cat or small dog.
- 5. Holly Berries & Mistletoe:** All parts of the mistletoe are toxic, although the berries are especially bad for pets. Be careful that if you hang mistletoe from the ceiling that the berries do not drop on the floor. Signs that a pet may be suffering from mistletoe poisoning include vomiting, diarrhea, urinating more than usual, and a fast heart/respiratory rate. The same holds true for holly berries.
- 6. Christmas Trees (Cedar):** Pets who eat the bark may come down with a stomachache, while the sap can cause an itchy skin rash. Tinsel is a bad idea, since much like ribbon, it can become stuck in a pet's intestines.
- 7. Pointsettias:** They're festive, but the sap can cause blistering in a pet's mouth as well as stomach irritation.
- 8. Turkey/Ham/Fish bones:** Never share these with your pets--they can splinter and cause intestinal tearing or become stuck in the pet's throat, resulting in choking. Choose a better alternative like a piece of rawhide or chew toy that is sold especially for pet consumption.
- 9. The garbage can:** Items like raw meat, juice-soaked string used to tie up roasts, and plastic/foil wrap can have fatal consequences for pets if ingested. Raw meat may be infected with bacteria or parasites like *T. gondii*, *E.coli* or *salmonella*, while string and plastic/foil wrap can cause intestinal obstruction or choking. Make sure your trash can has a tight-fitting, secure lid and is stored in a location that cannot be



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accessed by pets. Furthermore, keep a close eye on pets when cleaning up after a holiday soiree. Turning your back on Fluffy, even for a second, could spell disaster if she snatches those salmon bones and runs under the bed with them.

10. Tobacco products: You may not smoke, but what about your friends and family? If ingested, tobacco products can cause pets to seize, or collapse and die from cardiac arrest. Keep all tobacco products (including patches, nicotine gum, etc) out of their reach and empty your ashtrays often since cigarette butts contain 1/4 the amount of nictotine present in an entire cigarette.

What to Do if Your Pet Ingests Something You Suspect is Toxic

Call the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center

Established in 1978, the APCC is the only 24-hour, 365-day facility of its kind staffed by 30 veterinarians, 12 of who are board-certified toxicologists/veterinary toxicologists. Located in Urbana, Ill., the specially trained staff provides assistance to pet owners, and specific diagnostic and treatment recommendations to veterinarians pertaining to toxic chemicals and dangerous plants, products or substances. In 2006, the center handled over 116,000 cases. The APCC also provides extensive veterinary toxicology consulting on a wide array of subjects, including legal cases, formulation issues, product liability, and regulatory reporting. For more information on potentially dangerous substances in the home or to reach the APCC, please call (888) 426-4435 or visit www.aspc.org/pet-care/poison-control/

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