

POISONS AND OTHER HOLIDAY HAZARDS

Mindy G. Bough, CVT
 ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center
 Urbana, Illinois



Seasonal goodies can be tempting and toxic to pets.

The approach of winter brings the opportunity for a refresher on some potential hazards of the season. Many pets tend to get less exercise during the winter months, especially in areas where winters are harsh. This lack of activity and stimulation often leads to mischief. Pets may get into things they ordinarily would not. Holiday foods and plants, rodenticides, antifreeze, liquid potpourris, ice melts, Christmas tree hazards, and medications are high on the list of potential winter perils for pets.¹

FOOD

The foods listed in the box on this page are potential dangers to pets. Owners should be sure to store these items out of reach from their canine and feline friends. Moldy or spoiled foods are often accessed straight from the garbage can or from compost piles. Owners should plan for and prevent these types of exposures. Party foods are often left unattended as guests move from room to room in a home, providing the perfect opportunity for a pet to snatch goodies. Holiday cooks and bakers should beware that many of the ingredients they use can cause

serious problems if ingested in high enough quantity by a pet.¹

PLANTS

Holiday plants are lovely and festive but may become pretty poison for pets. Poinsettia (*Euphorbia pulcherrima*) has historically been regarded as highly toxic; however, this plant is on the low end of the toxic scale. Ingestion of this plant is not likely to cause serious problems but may cause some gastrointestinal (GI) upset.^{2,3}

Christmas cactus (*Schlumbergera truncata*) is another plant that can cause GI upset. Although ingesting this

plant would not cause serious problems for most animals, it could cause discomfort and could be more problematic for elderly animals or those with serious medical conditions.^{2,3}

Mistletoe is a semiparasitic vine

Potentially Harmful Foods

- Alcoholic beverages
- Avocado
- Chocolate (baker's, semi-sweet, milk chocolate)
- Coffee (grounds, beans, chocolate-covered espresso beans)
- Fatty foods
- Garlic and garlic powder
- Grapes and raisins
- Hops (used in home brewing)
- Macadamia nuts
- Moldy or spoiled foods
- Onions and onion powder
- Salt
- Yeast dough

that penetrates its host plant's vascular system. Therefore, the toxic potential of mistletoe is likely affected by the toxicity of its host plant. American mistletoe (*Phoradendron serotinum*) most often causes depression and vomiting in dogs and cats, but this plant and others in the mistletoe family have the potential to cause more serious signs, such as low blood pressure and cardiovascular collapse resulting from the host plant's toxic characteristics.^{1,3}

American holly (*Ilex opaca*) contains the methylxanthines caffeine and theobromine, a bitter-tasting toxalbumin called *ilicin*, and detergent-like substances called *saponins*. A dog or cat would likely need to ingest a large amount of this plant to have serious signs. Most commonly, dogs and cats experience GI upset and depression from exposure to this plant.²

RODENTICIDES

Rodenticides are frequently put out during cold weather months to prevent rodents from establishing residence indoors and in garages. These products can be extremely dangerous to pets if ingested. Exposure to anticoagulant rodenticides generally causes signs of hemorrhage 3 to 5 days later. Rodenticides containing the neurotoxin bromethalin can cause neurologic signs within hours of exposure, but signs may be delayed for a week or more when low doses of bromethalin are ingested.^{1,4} Rodenticides containing cholecalciferol (Vitamin D₃) cause elevations of serum calcium and phosphorus. Signs progressing to renal fail-

ure generally begin within 12 hours of exposure.¹

ANTIFREEZE

Antifreeze leaks and spills are opportunities for pets to lap up sweet poison. As little as 15 ml (1 tbsp) of 50% diluted antifreeze can be lethal to a 10-lb cat. Spills should be cleaned up immediately and unused product stored out of reach. Even suspected exposures to antifreeze warrant immediate veterinary care.⁵

LIQUID POTPOURRIS

Liquid potpourris provide wonderful holiday aromas but may contain very irritating cationic detergents and essential oils. Oral exposure to liquid potpourris may cause oral, pharyngeal, and esophageal ulceration. Dermal exposure may cause significant irritation and potentially lead to oral exposure when an animal grooms itself.⁶

ICE MELTS

Ice melts are dermal and GI irritants, and ingestion of these products may cause salt toxicosis. Therefore, pet owners should store ice melts out of reach and wipe off their pets' paws after they have been outdoors.⁷

CHRISTMAS TREES

Christmas trees bring holiday cheer but also many potential hazards to pets. Tree food or preservative that is added to the water of a live Christmas tree can cause GI upset if ingested by dogs or cats. Foreign body risks include tinsel, ribbons, and glass or plastic ornaments. Batteries for new toys may also be a foreign body risk and cause GI corrosion. Electrical cords may be chewed on, especially by puppies or kittens, resulting in electrocution.¹

MEDICATIONS

Because winter is the season for colds and influenza, pet owners may have more medications in their homes. These medications should be kept out of reach of pets, preferably in closed cabinets. Holiday visitors may forget

Hazards of the Season

- Antifreeze
- Batteries
- Christmas tree preservative
- Electrical cords
- Holiday decorations
- Holiday foods
- Holiday plants
- Ice melts
- Liquid potpourris
- Medications
- Rodenticides

to secure their over-the-counter or prescription medications, providing the perfect opportunity for pets to chew on bottles of medication or snatch tablets from bedside tables. Pet owners should be sure to remind visitors to be careful with their medications to prevent dangerous exposures to pets.¹

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author thanks Sharon Gwaltney-Brant, DVM, PhD, DABVT, DABT, who is affiliated with the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center in Urbana, Illinois, for her contribution to and review of this column.

REFERENCES

1. American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Animal Poison Control Center Case Database: Unpublished data, Urbana, IL, 1998-2003.
2. Farbman DB: 'Tis the season to be informed: Toxic potential of holiday plants. *Vet Tech* 21(11):630-631, 2000.
3. Volmer PA: How dangerous are winter and spring holiday plants to pets? *Vet Med* 97(12):879-884, 2002.
4. Moorman MM: Anticoagulant rodenticides: Now more toxic to pests and pets. *Vet Tech* 23(1):34-36, 2002.
5. Hull WK: Ethylene glycol testing. *Vet Tech* 22(4):201-202, 216, 2001.
6. Foss TS: Liquid potpourri and cats: Essence of trouble. *Vet Tech* 23(11):686-689, 2002.
7. Foss TS: The hazards of ice melts to dogs and cats. *Vet Tech* 23(2):94-95, 104, 2002.

