

HOLIDAY PET SAFETY TIPS

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Ho ho ho and mistletoe may make us merry here at Best Paw Forward Inc., but too much holiday fun can be a problem for our four-legged family members.

Mistletoe, holly, poinsettia, Jerusalem cherries, and other holiday plants including many lily varieties should be kept out of the reach of your dogs. Plant a noisy motion detector among the holiday greenery and festive color to discourage feline munching.

Lists of toxic plants and other dangerous items are available from the Pet Poison Helpline, at petpoisonhelpline.com. The Jerusalem cherry, for instance, may cause abdominal pain, vomiting and diarrhea, and nervous system effects.

Enticing extension cords and sparkly ornaments can be made less attractive to the dogs but still retain that warm glow for us with the addition of a frequent light application of bitter-tasting products specifically designed for pets or cologne (it is too smelly for most pets).

Apply the foul-tasting sprays while the item is unplugged and cool, and reapply daily at first if you have a persistently munching pet. Never spray these items, which contain alcohol, on any light bulb or candle.

Keep electric cords, batteries and ornaments out of reach to prevent electric shock, burns to the mouth and esophagus from a chewed-up

Wagging tails on dogs and curious noses on kitties can have a disastrous effect when combined with lit candles, so place candles high up or in protective and decorative hurricane glass covers. The same goes for snow globes since some may contain antifreeze.

Avoid leaving candles and delicate or wobbly items on an unsteady table that might shake when your retriever runs into it while playing with his squeaky toy.



Christmas Trees

If you already have a puppy in the house, consider putting a smaller Christmas tree up on a table, or anchor and place a child's play pen or a metal pet exercise pen around a full-size tree. That also keeps your pet away the stagnant, potentially bacteria-infested or fertilizer-filled water beneath a real tree.

Garland and lights can be strung around the inside of the pen. Again, cords must be out of reach, and turn off and unplug all decorative lights when you leave pets home alone.

While you are looking at the hazards of a tree, eliminate food products from the tree decorations – no popcorn nor cranberry garlands, nor gingerbread men nor candy canes to tempt the pets.

Tinsel is especially tempting to playful cats and pups, and quite dangerous.

Make sure your holiday tree is anchored overhead or in several directions on the sides. Lightweight tree stands can allow the tree to tip when hit by a sliding Irish setter.

Also keep pets away from the water in stands. It would be bad enough to just deal with the typical bacteria found there, but add in fertilizer, chemical products to extend the tree's house time or, as some folks do, aspirin, and the situation could go from bad to worse in a hurry. Place screening over the pan to shield it if all else fails. Also stick to nontoxic artificial snow.

Food and Drink

Holiday meals are no time to start feeding pets from the table, and a great time to stop if you are already committing this pet owner behavioral faux pas.

Leftovers from your family's famously rich Thanksgiving, Hanukah, Christmas or Kwanzaa food may be dribbled out in tiny amounts (no cooked bones, no chocolate, no raisins, no grapes, no onions, no garlic, no artificial sweeteners).



Tiny bits of leftover drippings, meats, cooked or chopped vegetables and fruits can be added to several cups of dry dog food and stashed in the freezer in plastic bags or other containers. You then have inexpensive additive-free treats with all the nutrition of the pet food you are feeding, or, like our own dogs and cats, from the 3-4 types of pet food you provide in rotation for healthier pets.

As you dive into a holiday baking frenzy, keep a close eye on the baking chocolate because of its high concentration of theobromine. Chocolate can actually be lethal to small pets and at the very least can have some very unpleasant, messy, smelly consequences even with the largest of dogs.

Store chocolate and most food products in securely sealed cupboards and drawers, not on countertops or end tables. Chocolate cookies and candies with less chocolate in them may not require you to go into extreme panic mode if a large Fido pilfers a tiny treat or two. It depends on the amount of pure chocolate in each goodie and the size of the pet, but it is safest to keep all out of reach.

As you do more baking during the holidays, be extra careful about where you place bread dough to rise or rest between cooking steps. When a pet eats dough it continues to rise internally and might cause an intestinal blockage.

Whether cooking them yourselves or picking up a product at the store, avoid sharing anything with your pet if the food is artificially sweetened. This is especially true of the sweetener Xylitol, which is showing up in baked goods now as well as in chewing gum. Blood sugar levels can drop rapidly from xylitol poisoning, and if treatment fails the result may be liver failure.

All discarded food products should go into secure waste receptacles and removed from the house immediately. Outside containers should be secure, or place tempting trash outside safely fenced areas where dogs may play or spend even a few minutes unattended.

Keep alcoholic beverages out of reach to prevent possible illness, coma and respiratory failure.

Gifts

If you wait to unwrap individual gifts from friends and family, ask them if there is anything inside that might entice your pet if the item was left under the Christmas tree. Place food presents and pet gifts high up or otherwise out of reach of pets.

Most pets do not need to learn how to open their own packages. Like toddlers they will have trouble stopping at theirs and may go on to open your gifts.

Wrappings such as coated paper, ribbon, tape and package decoration can cause potentially fatal internal blockages. The same problem of possible blockages, as well as many other potential ill effects, is why our own dogs never get rawhide, in any form, as gifts and we do not give rawhide gifts to other households.



Guests in the House:

All the extra attention from visitors is fun for most pets, but not for all and not when it becomes excessive or inappropriate play. Crate training is an important tool to give your pet a place to go and relax away from the madding crowds.

Take extra care with guests and busy family members entering and leaving the house. This can be a common time of year for Spot or Fluffy to escape through open doors. Remind the household members every day that safety is more important than freedom with it comes to our animal companions.

Snap a close-up picture of your pooch or kitty, printed out on full-size sheets of paper. Tape copies to all entrances and exits at both adult and child eye levels so everyone gets a visual clue to be extra careful with open doors.

Open windows are more common here in Florida during the winter. A securely fitted baby gate can be used to keep dogs and cats from pushing screens out and escaping, and helps protect the family toddler as well.

Getting a Puppy for the Holidays?

You are very brave! The holidays are the worst possible time for most families to get new pets. All too frequently the puppies and kitten end up in shelters in a few months. The chief reason: Those first days with a new pet turned out to be less fun than anticipated because the entire family was already busy, stressed and tired. Consequently housetraining became a chore instead of the easy process it could be with a normal, non-holiday schedule.

Many puppies and kittens are injured or even killed every year because families, especially those with children, are super busy on Christmas Day. When new pets are not closely supervised, they can swallow dangerous items, get shocked chewing on electric cords, get stepped on, or slip outside and get hit by cars.

If you feel your family is ready for the responsibility of a new dog or cat, you can still get the warm glow of a welcome surprise, and avoid wrinkled noses from the malodor that results from a puppy that needs to go out when its family is distracted with holiday visitors or after-holiday shopping and gift returns.

Wrap up pet supplies such as a puppy kennel or a litter box along with clickers, books or DVD's from our recommended list, food and water dishes, safe pet toys (like the durable Nylabone and black sturdy Extreme Kong), brushes, combs, nail clippers and styptic powder, and a disposable camera, data stick or memory card to document the new arrival's first days in your home.

Tuck in a Best Paw Forward Inc. gift certificate for PuppyLove, Basic Manners or private classes, or advanced classes like rally and agility for your serious dog event fans, along with a note promising to find the perfect new addition to the household after the holiday madness is done.

Waiting a few weeks to bring the newbie into the home, and picking out a personality that suits the entire family, would provide a smoother transition for a long, happy life together.

P.J. Lacette owns Best Paw Forward Inc., and has been training dogs in Central Florida for nearly 40 years. She is a charter member of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers and belongs to numerous dog groups and clubs.

Best Paw Forward Inc. has produced many nationally ranked and record-setting dogs in obedience, agility and conformation, and is well-known in the community for its special PuppyLove classes for puppies 8 to 18 weeks old and other group and private classes, as well as for seminars ranging from beginner behavior to managing rescue dogs to aggression counseling. Dogs from the training program have appeared in advertising of all kinds.

We have the longest-running group clicker training classes in the southeast U.S. Clicker and lure-reward training, shorthand terms for reward-based operant conditioning, utilize basic learning principles to forge strong positive bonds between the pet and family.

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