

## Halloween Dangers

Almost 65% percent of Americans celebrated Halloween in 2021 according to U.S.A. Today. Halloween is also a very busy time at Pet Poison Helpline. During the weeks surrounding Halloween, call volumes increase significantly, making it consistently one of our busiest weeks of the year. While most of the calls involve dogs of various breeds and sizes, other animals such as cats, ferrets, and pocket pets were also represented. Pet Poison Helpline is a 24-hour animal poison control service that assists pet owners, veterinarians and veterinary technicians who are treating potentially poisoned pets.



**Chocolate:** Of all candies, chocolate poses the biggest Halloween threat, especially to dogs. Many dogs are attracted to the deep, rich smell of chocolate, making it a significant threat for massive ingestion. The darker and more bitter the chocolate, the more poisonous it is. Methylxanthines, theobromine and caffeine, are the dangerous chemicals in chocolate and they are more concentrated in darker chocolates. A single ounce of Baker's chocolate can make a 50-pound dog very sick. Milk chocolate and white chocolate are less dangerous but should still be kept out of the reach of pets. The onset of clinical signs is rapid, generally occurring between 1-4 hours and may include gastrointestinal upset (vomiting and diarrhea), CNS abnormalities (restlessness or agitation, ataxia muscle tremors, or seizures in severe cases), cardiovascular problems (tachycardia, cardiac arrhythmias, or hypertension), and PU/PD or urinary incontinence. Hyperthermia often occurs secondary to hyperactivity and muscle tremors. Death from respiratory failure, untreated cardiac arrhythmias, or prolonged seizure activity may occur with large ingestions.



**Candy and sweets:** Candy and other sweet foods – especially those containing xylitol, a 5-carbon sugar substitute - can be poisonous to pets. Large ingestions of sugary, high-fat candy and sweets may lead to pancreatitis. Most pet owners are surprised to learn that signs of pancreatitis such as anorexia, abdominal pain vomiting, and diarrhea may not present for several days after ingestion. Xylitol, which is highly toxic to dogs, is found in seemingly every product from candies to gums to toothpaste and more. Ingestion of xylitol containing products results in a rapid onset of hypoglycemia (unless the product is more slowly digestible such as gum or hard candies) and acute hepatic necrosis leading to depression, vomiting, diarrhea, weakness, ataxia, coagulopathies, and potentially death. It is important to note that other sugar free products such as aspartame, maltitol and sorbitol do not result in a massive insulin release like xylitol does.



**Raisins:** Mini boxes of raisins can be a healthy treat for trick-or-treaters, but they are extremely poisonous to dogs. Raisins are so dangerous that they deserve the same dog-proofing treatment as chocolate and xylitol – never feed to dogs, store in secure containers, and keep well out of their reach. The toxin associated with poisoning has not been identified and the mechanism of toxicity, including whether toxicity is dose related or idiosyncratic is unknown, making this a very frustrating poisoning to treat. Some dogs show no signs at all after ingestion, and some develop acute kidney injury. Vomiting, often whole or partially digested raisins, is the most consistent sign of poisoning followed by anorexia, lethargy, dehydration and death. Due to the presumed idiosyncratic nature, decontamination and treatment is currently recommended for all dogs ingesting raisins.



**Glow sticks and glow jewelry:** Most 'glow sticks' or glow in the dark jewelry contain dibutyl phthalate, an oily, chemiluminescent substance. Due to their curious nature, cats often chew on glow sticks and jewelry. While not usually life-threatening, dibutyl phthalate can cause mouth pain and irritation, as well as profuse hypersalivation and foaming. The signs are self-limiting and oral irrigation followed by a small amount of a palatable liquid such as tuna water is all that is required. Pets ingesting glow sticks or glow jewelry should be evaluated in a dark room for evidence of the product on their hair coat. If present, it should be removed with a mild soap.



**Candy wrappers and sticks:** When curious pets get into candy, they are in danger of a life-threatening bowel obstruction from lodged foil and cellophane wrappers, sticks, and other Halloween packaging pieces. X-rays are often helpful in the diagnosis, although sometimes an ultrasound may be necessary. Watch for vomiting, decreased appetite, not defecating, straining to defecate, or lethargy.

**Costumes:** Many people dress their pets in a costume for parties and other special events. Ingestion of metallic beads, snaps or other small pieces, especially those that contain zinc or lead, can result in serious poisoning. If a pet has chewed or eaten part of the costume, radiographs may be helpful in determining whether metallic bodies are present in the stomach or intestines. Dying or coloring an animal's hair coat is not recommended as some of these products can be very harmful to pets, even if it's labeled non-toxic to humans.

**Batteries:** Halloween seems to be the time of year when there is an increase in the number of pets chewing on or swallowing batteries. Both dry cell batteries (acid or alkaline) and lithium disc batteries are toxic, but for different reasons. When dry cell batteries are chewed and the casing ruptured, acidic or alkaline material can leak from the battery and ulcerate exposed mucosal tissues. Lithium disc batteries contain no corrosive material but are more harmful than dry cell batteries. Smaller lithium disc batteries are especially problematic, as they tend to stick in the esophagus and generate an electric current between mucosal tissues resulting in severe tissue damage and potential perforation. One small 3-volt lithium disc battery lodged in the esophagus can cause necrosis in as little as 15 minutes. Metals such as lead, mercury, zinc, and cobalt may be present in the casings and heavy metal toxicity may occur if batteries or pieces remain in the gastrointestinal tract for longer than a few days. Radiographs of the entire GIT (including the mouth pharynx, esophagus as well as the stomach and intestines) are very helpful in determining the battery location. Serial radiographs taken just a few hours apart may be needed to assess battery movement. Endoscopy or surgery may be required if the battery has not moved and appears to be lodged or stuck in the esophagus.

This Halloween, please help keep pets safe. The veterinary toxicology experts at Pet Poison Helpline suggest that it's always easier, less expensive, and safer for a pet to be treated earlier, versus when it's showing severe signs. Pet Poison Helpline is the most cost-effective animal poison control center in North America. The nominal consultation fee includes follow-up consultations and a large staff of experts always available to assist you.

**Pet Poison Helpline**, an animal poison control center based out of Minneapolis, is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week for pet owners and veterinary professionals that require assistance treating a potentially poisoned pet. The staff provides treatment advice for poisoning cases of all species, including dogs, cats, birds, small mammals, large animals and exotic species. As the most cost-effective option for animal poison control care, Pet Poison Helpline's per incident fee includes follow-up consultations for the duration of the treatment time. Pet Poison Helpline is available in North America by calling **800-213-6680**. Additional information can be found online at [www.petpoisonhelpline.com](http://www.petpoisonhelpline.com).