

Holiday & Winter Toxins Newsletter

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During the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, it is easy to let your guard down when it comes to preventing toxic exposures to your pet. While the holidays bring more challenges to the already difficult winter months, we cannot forget about outdoor toxin concerns frequently seen this time of year. Below is a list of holiday-related decorations, plants and food items that the veterinarians at Pet Poison Helpline recommend keeping away from pets.

Holiday Ornaments and decorations: When decorating for the season, consider your pets. Holiday decorations such as old-fashioned bubble lights may contain poisonous chemicals. If a pet chews on them, the liquid inside could be dangerous to their health. Methylene chloride, the chemical in older bubble lights, can result in depression, aspiration pneumonia, and irritation to the eyes, skin and gastrointestinal tract. Glass ornaments that shine and shimmer are often an enticing toy for your pet. However, if they were to bite in to, or break one during play, the small glass pieces can lead to lacerations to the skin and mouth, as well as damage to the esophagus and gastrointestinal tract. Homemade dough ornaments pose a risk for causing elevated sodium levels that may lead to severe neurologic abnormalities. If any of these types of tree decorations are being used for your tree, it is recommended to keep them towards the upper portion of the tree, where they are less likely to be accessed by your pet. Many animals develop electrical burns in their mouth from chewing on strands of lights, particularly cats and puppies. It is ideal to minimize dangling light strands to make them less appealing to pets.

Tinsel: Another holiday ornament to avoid is tinsel. If you own a cat, toss the tinsel! What looks like a shiny toy to your cat can prove deadly if ingested. While tinsel itself is not “poisonous,” it can result in a linear foreign body when eaten. A linear foreign body occurs when your pet swallows something “stringy” (like ribbon, yarn, tinsel, etc.), which wraps around the base of the tongue or anchors itself in the stomach, rendering it unable to pass through the intestines. As the intestines contract and move, this string or linear foreign body can slowly saw through the tissue, resulting in severe, potentially life-threatening damage to your pet’s intestinal tract. Ultimately, pets run the risk of severe injury to, or rupture of, their intestines and treatment requires costly abdominal surgery. Save your holiday bonus for yourself instead of your pet’s surgery, and keep tinsel, ribbon, yarn, thread, fabric, etc. out of reach!

Liquid Potpourri/Oils/Candles: Filling your house with the smell of nutmeg or pine for the holidays may seem inviting—but if you’re partial to heating your scented oils in a simmer pot, know that they can cause serious harm to your cat; even a few licks can result in severe chemical burns in the mouth, fever, difficulty breathing, and tremors. Dogs aren’t as sensitive, but it’s still better to be safe than sorry—so scent your home with a non-toxic candle kept safely out of kitty’s reach. Dry potpourri may also cause chemical burns in the mouth, and potential foreign bodies and gastrointestinal upset depending on the size of animal and amount ingested. While candles are often scented with oils, the largest concern with ingestion is a foreign body and potential obstruction. In addition to an upset stomach, surgical removal of the candle may be necessary in severe cases.

Plants: Though they have a bad rap, poinsettia plants are only mildly toxic. Far more worrisome are holiday bouquets containing lilies (*Lilium* spp), holly, or mistletoe. Even bouquets brought into the house by holiday guests should be thoroughly inspected, as lilies are one of the most commonly used. Just one or two bites from a lily can result in kidney failure in cats – even the pollen and water that the plant is in are thought to be poisonous! When in doubt, don’t let these bouquets in a cat-loving household!

Other yuletide plants such as holly berries and mistletoe can also be toxic to pets. When Christmas or English holly is ingested, it can result in severe gastrointestinal upset thanks to the spiny leaves and the potentially toxic

substances (including saponins, methylxanthines, and cyanogens). If ingested, most pets smack their lips, drool, and head shake excessively due to the mechanical injury from the spiny leaves. As for mistletoe, most of us hang it high enough so it's out of reach of our pets – nevertheless, it can also be toxic if ingested. Thankfully, American mistletoe is less toxic than the European varieties. Mild signs of gastrointestinal irritation are seen, although if ingested in large amounts, collapse, hypotension (low blood pressure), ataxia (difficulty walking), seizures and death have also been reported.

Recently, florists have started to use Japanese Yew (*Taxus* spp.) to make wreaths – all parts of this evergreen except for the flesh of the red aril are very poisonous, as they contain taxines, a cardiotoxin. If ingested, this plant can result in dizziness, an abnormal heart rate (initially elevated, then slowed), hypotension, dilated pupils, coma, and death. As horses are very susceptible to yew poisoning, make sure not to have this around the barn or pasture!

Alcohol: Most people know not to give alcoholic drinks to their pets; however, alcohol poisoning in pets is more common than you think. This is because alcohol can be found in surprising places! Rum-soaked fruitcake, or unbaked dough that contains yeast, result in alcohol poisoning and other problems. Rising dough will expand in the warm, moist environment of the stomach and can result in a bloat, which can then progress to a GDV or gastric-dilatation with volvulus (twisted stomach). Signs of this include vomiting, non-productive retching, distended stomach, an elevated heart rate, and weakness or collapse. Secondly, alcohol from the fermenting yeast is rapidly absorbed into the bloodstream and affects pets quickly. Ingestion of alcohol can cause dangerous drops in blood sugar, blood pressure, and body temperature. Intoxicated animals can experience seizures and respiratory failure.

Holiday Foods: With the holiday season comes a delightful variety of baked goods, chocolate confections and other rich, fattening foods. However, it is not wise, and in some cases, quite dangerous, to share these treats with your pets. Keep your pet on his or her regular diet over the holidays and do not let family and friends sneak in treats. Foods that can present problems include:

- Foods containing **grapes, raisins and currants** (such as fruit cakes, breads and cookies) can result in kidney failure in dogs.
- **Chocolate and cocoa** contain theobromine, a chemical highly toxic to dogs and cats. Ingestion in small amounts can cause vomiting and diarrhea but large amounts can cause seizures and heart arrhythmias.
- Many **sugarless gums and candies** contain xylitol, a sweetener which is toxic to dogs. It causes a life-threatening drop in blood sugar and liver failure.
- Leftover fatty, **meat scraps** can produce severe inflammation of the pancreas (pancreatitis) leading to abdominal pain, vomiting and bloody diarrhea.

Ice Melt: Ice melts are commonly used around entryways and sidewalks and the containers that are filled with these products are often left within a pet's reach. There are numerous formulations available, many of which contain salt (sodium chloride), and small exposures typically lead to stomach upset, and dermal and paw pad irritation. Larger ingestions may quickly cause salt poisoning which can result in a rapid onset of vomiting, excessive thirst and seizures. If your pet has consumed any amount of ice melt, it is important to call for help.

When it comes to the holidays, the best thing a pet owner can do is to become educated on common indoor and outdoor household toxins and pet-proof your environment accordingly. If you think your pet has been poisoned, contact your veterinarian or **Pet Poison Helpline** at 800-213-6680, with any questions or concerns.

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.

