

Top 10 Human Medications Poisonous to Pets



Tips from Pet Poison Helpline to Help Keep Your Pet Safe!

By Ahna Brutlag, DVM, MS, DABT, DABVT, Director of Veterinary Services

Nearly half of the calls received by Pet Poison Helpline involve human medications – both over-the-counter and prescription. Whether Fido accidentally chewed into a pill bottle or a well-intentioned pet owner accidentally gave him her own medication, pet poisonings due to medication are common and can be very serious.

Pet Poison Helpline is a 24-hour service available throughout North America for pet owners and veterinary professionals who require assistance treating a potentially poisoned pet. It is the only animal poison control with board-certified veterinary toxicologists, internal medicine specialists, emergency critical care specialists, and pharmacists on staff. As experts in both veterinary and human medicine, Pet Poison Helpline provides a critical service to pet owners and veterinarians facing the conundrum of a pet exposed to human medications.

Below is a list of the top 10 human medications most frequently ingested by pets, along with some tips from the veterinarians at Pet Poison Helpline on how to prevent pet poisoning from human medications.

1. **NSAIDs** (e.g. Advil and Aleve)

At the top of list are common household medications called non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs), which include drugs such as ibuprofen (e.g. Advil, Motrin, Midol) and naproxen (e.g. Aleve). While these medications are safe for people, even one or two pills can cause serious harm to a pet. Dogs, cats, birds, and other small mammals (e.g., ferrets, gerbils and hamsters) may develop life-threatening stomach and intestinal ulcers, kidney failure, and coma (ferrets).

2. **Acetaminophen** (e.g. Tylenol)

When it comes to pain medications, acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol) is certainly popular. Even though this drug is safe, even for children, this is not true for pets—especially cats. One regular strength tablet of acetaminophen may cause damage to a cat's red blood cells—limiting their ability to carry oxygen—and liver failure. While dogs are less sensitive than cats, the same symptoms can occur in large overdoses.

3. **Antidepressants** (e.g. Effexor, Cymbalta, Prozac, Lexapro)

Although antidepressant drugs are used in pets, overdoses can lead to serious neurological problems such as sedation, incoordination, tremors, and seizures. Some antidepressants also have a stimulant effect leading to a dangerously elevated heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature. Pets, especially cats, seem to enjoy the taste of Effexor and often eat the entire pill. Unfortunately, just one pill can cause serious poisoning.

4. **ADD/ADHD medications** (e.g. Concerta, Adderall, Ritalin, Vyvanse)

Medications used to treat attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder contain potent stimulants such as amphetamines and methylphenidate. Even minimal ingestions of these medications by pets can cause life-threatening tremors, seizures, elevated body temperatures, and heart problems.

5. **Benzodiazepines and sleep aids** (e.g. Valium, Xanax, Klonopin, Ambien, Lunesta, Sonata)

These medications are designed to reduce anxiety and help people sleep better. In pets, they may have the opposite effect. About half of the dogs who ingest sleep aids become agitated instead of sedate. In addition, these drugs may cause severe lethargy, incoordination, and slowed breathing in pets. In cats, some benzodiazepines can cause liver failure when ingested.

6. **Birth control** (e.g. estrogen, estradiol, progesterone)
Birth control pills often come in packages that dogs find irresistible. Thankfully, small ingestions of these medications typically do not cause trouble. However, large ingestions of estrogen and estradiol can cause bone marrow suppression, particularly in birds. Additionally, female pets that are intact (not spayed) are at an increased risk of side effects from estrogen poisoning.
7. **ACE Inhibitors** (e.g. Lotensin, Vasotec, Accupril, Zestril, Altace)
Angiotensin-converting enzyme (“ACE”) inhibitors are commonly used to treat high blood pressure in people and, occasionally, pets. Though overdoses can result in low blood pressure, dizziness, and weakness, this category of medication is typically quite safe. Pets ingesting small amounts of this medication can potentially be monitored at home, unless they have kidney failure or heart disease. All heart medications must be kept out of reach of pets as some pose a much greater risk of poisoning.
8. **Beta-blockers** (e.g. Sectral, Corgard, Levatol, Inderal, Tenormin, Toprol, Coreg)
Beta-blockers are also used to treat high blood pressure but, unlike the ACE inhibitor, small ingestions of these drugs may cause serious poisoning in pets. Overdoses can cause life-threatening decreases in blood pressure and a very slow heart rate.
9. **Thyroid hormones** (e.g. levothyroxine, Armour desiccated thyroid, Synthroid)
Pets—especially dogs—have underactive thyroids too. Interestingly, the dose of thyroid hormone needed to treat dogs is much higher than a person’s dose. Therefore, if dogs accidentally get into thyroid hormones at home, it rarely results in problems. However, large acute overdoses in cats and dogs can cause muscle tremors, nervousness, panting, a rapid heart rate, and aggression.
10. **Cholesterol lowering agents** (e.g. Atoprev, Lescol, Lipitor, Zocor, Crestor, Mevacor)
These popular medications, often called “statins,” are commonly used in the United States. While pets do not typically suffer from high cholesterol, they may still get into the pill bottle. Thankfully, most “statin” ingestions only cause mild vomiting or diarrhea. Serious side effects from these drugs come with long-term use, not one-time ingestions.

Always keep medications safely out of reach and never administer a medication to a pet without first consulting your veterinarian. The following are some tips from Pet Poison Helpline to help prevent pets from getting into over-the-counter or prescription medication:

- Never leave loose pills in a plastic baggie—the bags are too easy to chew into. Make sure visiting house guests do the same and keep their medications locked up or out of reach.
- If you place your medication in a weekly pill container, make sure to store the container in a cabinet out of reach of your pets. Unfortunately, if they get a hold of it, some pets might consider the pill container a plastic chew toy.
- Never store your medications near your pet’s medications – Pet Poison Helpline frequently receives calls from concerned pet owners who inadvertently give their own medication to their pet.
- Hang up your purse. Inquisitive pets will explore the contents of your bag and simply placing your purse up and out of reach can help to avoid exposure to any potentially dangerous medication(s).

It is also important to note that while a medication may be safe for children, it may not be safe for animals. Pets metabolize medications very differently from people. Even seemingly benign over-the-counter or herbal medications may cause serious poisoning in pets. If your pet has ingested a human over-the-counter or prescription medication, please call your veterinarian or Pet Poison Helpline’s 24-hour animal poison control center at 800-213-6680 immediately.

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.