

The Top 10 Holiday Dangers For Pets

How To Ensure A Safe Holiday For You And Your Furry Friends

The holiday season is quickly upon us! The food, decorations, parties, traditions, and the food (did we mention that already?) all combine to make this a most special time of year, but they also present some unusual dangers for pets. Thankfully, with a little preparation and common sense, owners can protect their pets (and their pocketbooks) from the top 10 Christmas dangers for pets.

1. Fatty Foods

No holiday get-together is complete without a treat, or two, or three. High-fat foods abound this time of year, and to encourage friends and family to partake, we typically leave them out where they are readily accessible to both people and, unfortunately, to pets. Even if your dog or cat is not typically a table grazer, the combination of excitement, wonderful smells, and distracted owners can easily spell disaster.

Any time a dog or cat eats something they are not used to they are at risk for developing gastroenteritis, which typically produces vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal discomfort. High-fat foods are especially dangerous for dogs because of their association with pancreatitis, a potentially life-threatening condition that has similar symptoms but a more guarded prognosis.

2. Bones

Some dogs get bones as treats or presents. Others may abscond with them from the table or trash. In either case, chewing on bones can be very dangerous for dogs. Broken teeth are a common consequence, often necessitating expensive surgeries to extract or repair damaged teeth. Left untreated, broken teeth cause intense pain and eventually infection.

When bone is swallowed, it does not break down readily. They can splinter easily (especially the bones of poultry like chicken or turkey), and sharp shards can cause significant damage to the gastrointestinal tract and larger pieces may become stuck. In either case, aggressive medical treatment and/or surgery is often necessary to return a dog's GI function back to normal. You should never, ever give your pet cooked turkey or chicken bones of any kind.

3. Chocolate

Chocolate contains substances known as methylxanthines (specifically caffeine and theobromine) to which dogs are very sensitive. Different types of chocolate contain varying amounts of these substances, but in general the darker the chocolate the more dangerous it is. For example, unsweetened baker's chocolate contains up to 500 mg of methylxanthines per ounce while milk chocolate is in the 66 mg/ounce range.

At low levels (such as milk chocolate, which generally has low amounts of what amounts to poison for dogs), chocolate ingestion causes pets to develop vomiting, diarrhea, and hyper-excitability.

Higher doses can result in nervous system dysfunction (e.g., seizures), irregular heart rhythms, and death. Dogs that get into products containing chocolate are also at risk for pancreatitis because of their high fat content.

The seriousness of risk will depend on the darkness of the chocolate, the volume consumed, and the size and health of your dog. If your dog ingests chocolate of any kind, it is important to monitor them very carefully for any signs of change or sickness. In particular, if they eat a larger volume, or it is darker chocolate, you should consider calling an emergency veterinarian for advice.

4. Xylitol

Sugar-free gum, candy, baked goods, and other foods are also potentially toxic to dogs. After ingestion, xylitol, a common sugar substitute, is rapidly absorbed into a dog's blood stream. The blood "sugar" spike that results causes dogs to release massive amounts of insulin, driving sugar into cells, which results in a potentially fatal drop in blood sugar levels. Even if a dog survives this initial onslaught, xylitol ingestion can also cause liver failure and bleeding disorders.

The symptoms of xylitol poisoning in dogs include vomiting, diarrhea, weakness, lethargy, and collapse. If you suspect that your dog could have eaten even a small amount of xylitol, rub some Karo syrup, honey, or dissolved sugar on his gums and get him to the veterinarian immediately.

5. Nuts

We're not quite done with the topic of dangerous foods yet. Nuts, whether they are eaten on their own or as part of a treat, can cause vomiting and diarrhea in pets. When not chewed well, larger nuts can even become lodged in the throat or gastrointestinal tract. Of special concern are macadamia nuts, which contain an unknown toxic substance that can cause weakness and hind-end paralysis, and moldy nuts, which contain mycotoxins that can cause seizures and other neurologic problems in dogs.

Most of what we've talked about so far has been of primary concern to dog owners. So, let's now look at a couple of holiday traditions that are especially dangerous for cats (though of course, many of these same risks are hazardous to dogs as well).

6. Tinsel and Ribbon

Cats, kittens and puppies love to play with anything string-like, and as part of that play, cats sometimes swallow their "prey." Tinsel, ribbon, yarn, and similar objects have the nasty habit of becoming looped around the base of the tongue or getting anchored somewhere else along the intestinal tract. When this occurs, the intestines move along the string becoming pleated like an accordion, which results in tissue damage and organ dysfunction.

Animals that have ingested tinsel, string, or ribbon typically vomit, stop eating, and can develop life threatening abdominal infections if the "linear foreign body," as it is called, cuts through the intestinal wall.

7. Essential Oils

Liquid potpourri (e.g., a simmer pot) is especially popular during the holiday, but many owners are not aware of how hazardous they can be, especially to cats. Pets that lick or touch the oil can severe damage their oral mucous membranes, eyes, and skin. Typical symptoms include drooling, vomiting, gagging, depression, difficulty breathing, and oral ulcers. Dogs can also be affected but are not as sensitive to essential oils in comparison to cats.

If you must have essential oils around the house, keep them in areas where cats cannot come in contact with them.

8. Lighting and Candles

Candles and other open flames pose an obvious danger to both dogs and cats. A pet's fur can easily catch fire if he or she brushes against a candle or knocks over a decoration containing a small flame. Electrical lights are much safer, but dogs and cats will sometimes chew on their cords, which puts them at risk for electrocution. Even if a pet is not injured directly by knocking over an open flame or damaging a wire, a household fire may result.

When possible, choose battery-powered lights; tuck cords under furniture; and never leave a pet alone in a room with a candle or other source of fire.

9. Poisonous Plants

Giving and receiving festive holiday plants is a wonderful way to celebrate the season, just make sure that you choose only pet-friendly varieties. Eating just a small piece of a lily (*Lillium* spp.) results in kidney failure in cats. Ingesting holly can cause severe gastrointestinal signs and depression. Mistletoe does the same, with the added "bonus" of severe neurologic dysfunction and difficulty breathing.

Other plants like poinsettias and the needles from pine trees can cause less severe symptoms including oral irritation and mild vomiting, so it is generally a good idea to keep houseplants in locations where curious mouths cannot find them.

10. Holiday Ornaments

Many ornaments are the same size and general appearance as pet toys. It should not be surprising then that dogs and cats often treat them as such, with sometimes disastrous results. Christmas bulbs can shatter and lacerate feet, ornaments are chewed to bits or swallowed whole, and trees are knocked over in a pet's playful enthusiasm. Spend a little time teaching dogs and cats that all Christmas decorations are not to be played with, and provide pets with a few real toys of their own.

Christmas is wonderful, but all the hoopla can also make life hectic and more than a bit stressful. The last thing pet owners need to be added to the holiday "to-do" list is an emergency visit with the veterinarian. Avoid the top 10 Christmas dangers for pets so everyone can have a happy and healthy new year!

from your friends at Vets To Go