Holiday Hazards to Pets

- Dangerous foods include sugar-free candy and gum (which may contain xylitol), raisins and macadamia nuts (often found in trail mixes, cookies, and candy), grapes, bread dough, coffee, and alcohol.
- Dangerous plants include mistletoe, holly bushes and berries, aloe, lilies, baby’s breath, bird of paradise, daisies, and chrysanthemums.
- Other indoor and outdoor hazards include electrical cords, some holiday decorations, antifreeze, open flames (like candles and fireplaces), and ice-melt products.
- If you suspect your pet has eaten or drunk something toxic, call your veterinarian or the Animal Poison Control Center (888-426-4435).

For the average family, the holidays may be festive, but they are far from peaceful. While everyone is running around, shopping, and making merry, pets are sometimes left unattended and at risk for getting into mischief and more serious trouble.

Even with all possible precautions, accidents can still happen. Here are some of the most common things to look out for, and some tips about what to do if precautions aren’t enough to avoid a problem.

**Indoor Holiday Hazards**

**Dangerous plants**

Poinsettias, once the poster-plant for toxic holiday decorations, are still considered poisonous, but are probably not deadly in most cases. However, some other indoor plants and flowers should be added to the list of things to keep away from your pets. These include mistletoe, some evergreens (like some species of pine), holly bushes and berries, aloe, and some plants that are commonly found in floral arrangements, such as lilies, baby’s breath, bird of paradise, daisies, and chrysanthemums.

**Dangerous foods**

Like poinsettias, chocolate once had the reputation for being the worst thing your dog might eat during the holidays. The bad news is that chocolate is still quite dangerous and should still be avoided, but the good news is that most people already know that. Just remember that (1) darker chocolate is more potentially toxic than milk chocolate or white chocolate and (2) the smaller the dog and the larger the amount of chocolate, the more likely there will be problems. So if your 100-pound Labrador retriever eats a single Hershey’s Kiss, don’t panic, but if your 4-pound toy poodle eats some baking chocolate morsels or dark chocolate, get on the phone with your vet or the ASPCA’s Animal Poison Control Center (888-426-4435; a fee will apply) to learn what to do.

Other potentially dangerous holiday foods include sugar-free candy and gum (which may contain xylitol), raisins and macadamia nuts (often found in trail mixes, cookies, and candy), grapes, bread dough, coffee, and alcohol.

**Regular foods**

Yes, even chicken, turkey, beef, ham, and other “regular” foods (including those containing onions or garlic) can cause illness in pets. Bones are a very bad thing to give a pet. However, your dog or cat doesn’t have to eat bones or get into garbage to be in trouble. Often, well-meaning guests give pets table food, thinking that sharing is a good thing. Unfortunately, even a small amount of table food can cause vomiting or diarrhea, and some foods can cause pancreatitis (a life-threatening inflammation of the pancreas). If your pet is a moocher, consider keeping him or her in a separate room when everyone is eating. Pets can still share the holidays with you without being under the dinner table.
New treats and toys
Even treats intended for pets to chew on (like rawhide and jerky treats) can sometimes cause stomach upset if the particular treat is new to your pet. Holiday stockings stuffed with toys and treats are fun to give to pets, but before letting your pet eat everything in a stocking, pick out any items that are new or different. Offer only one of these at a time (ideally separated by a few days). If your pet experiences vomiting, diarrhea, or other problems after eating a holiday treat, it will be easier to tell which one it was and discontinue it. If illness is severe (repeated episodes of vomiting or diarrhea within a single day) and accompanied by lethargy (tiredness) or signs of pain, or if it persists for more than one day, contact your veterinarian for advice.

New toys should also be checked for small pieces that can be chewed off or broken and swallowed; sharp edges; and other potential hazards.

Decorations
Tinsel, angel hair, tree ornaments, ribbons, string, garlands, and other decorations can be irresistible to pets, but very dangerous. Intestinal damage and blockages are among the potential problems if your pet eats something like this. If these items can’t be eliminated from the house, keep them away from pets—especially when the pets are unattended. Even Christmas trees can pose a danger. Pets may eat the needles (even from artificial trees) or drink water from the base of the tree, which can be toxic (especially if there are preservatives in it). Decorative lights can get hot enough to burn a pet, so it is best to keep them out of reach too.

Electrical cords and outlets
A pet can suffer electrocution, mouth burns, and life-threatening injury to the brain and lungs if he or she chews on an electrical cord. Keep cords out of the way and cover any unused electrical outlets. Also, don’t leave batteries on a table (where “table surfers” can find them), and pick them up if they fall to the floor.

Heated surfaces and open flames
Fireplaces, wood-burning stoves, candles, and portable heaters are just a few hazards to keep your pets away from (or at least monitor when they are nearby). Not only can pets be burned, but candles or heaters can be knocked over and start a fire. Also, don’t forget to check smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors to make sure they are functioning properly.

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Outdoor Holiday Hazards
Many outdoor holiday hazards are related to regular winter hazards. Depending on where you live, your pets may not be exposed to all these potential hazards. But don’t dismiss your pet’s risk until you read ahead.

Outdoor holiday decorations
Extension cords, lights (which can get very hot), decorations that hang low enough to be chewed on, and decorations that can fall or blow over are just a few of the threats that await your pet outside and around your home. Don’t forget to check food-related decorations (like pumpkins and corn cobs) regularly. Pets may eat these items, even after they begin to rot.

Cold temperatures
As the temperature outside starts to get lower and you prepare for colder weather, it’s important to also prepare your pet for the winter. Even pets that are used to being outside are susceptible to frostbite and hypothermia (low body temperature). Pets that live outdoors need adequate shelter from wind, rain, and cold. Fresh, unfrozen water must be available at all times. Heated water bowls can be used to keep water from freezing. If an electrical source is not available, water should be kept in a covered, enclosed space to prevent it from freezing quickly. If your pet has a dog house or igloo, make sure the interior is insulated. Heated pet mats, along with a good layer of straw, are an option that can help keep your pet warm and comfortable. It is important to only use heated products that are approved for pets.
Outdoor cats may seek warmth under car hoods and can be injured or killed by the car’s fan belt. Before getting into your car, knock loudly on the hood to ensure that a cat is not hiding beneath.

Pets that live outside should be able to come inside when they want to. Old or sick pets should be kept indoors when possible and monitored closely for signs of illness. If severe winter storm warnings or extreme cold weather alerts recommending that humans stay indoors are issued in your area, it’s a good idea to bring your pet indoors, too. If that isn’t possible, a garage or mud room can provide enough shelter in some cases. However, if you’re used to idling your car in the garage to warm it up before leaving for work in the morning, be aware that carbon monoxide poisoning can occur if pets are enclosed in a garage with a running car (or if they are left in a car with the motor running).

**Antifreeze**

Also known as ethylene glycol, antifreeze is probably one of the most common and dangerous winter toxins. Antifreeze is highly toxic, and pets are sometimes attracted to its sweet smell and taste. Once a pet drinks antifreeze, the toxin is rapidly absorbed, and signs such as vomiting, loss of coordination, and depression can appear within 1 hour. The kidneys are most severely affected by antifreeze, and even if signs start to improve with treatment, the kidneys may have already started to shut down. Acute kidney failure can occur within 24 to 36 hours after antifreeze ingestion, so it’s important to take your pet to the vet immediately if you suspect he or she has drunk even a small amount of antifreeze.

Methanol, found in windshield wiper fluid, is also toxic to pets. So is isopropanol, commonly found in hand sanitizer gel, windshield de-icing agents, and rubbing alcohol.

**Salt and chemical ice melts**

Pets that walk on sidewalks or pathways that have been de-iced can have chapped, dry, painful paws. Also, because pets (especially cats) tend to lick their paws, they can be exposed to toxic chemicals found in some ice melts. Pet-safe ice melt products can be purchased at most home improvement and pet stores. However, not everyone in the neighborhood may use these products, so it’s important to wash your pet’s feet with a warm cloth after he or she comes in from being outside.

**What to Do if Something Happens**

If your pet has eaten something dangerous, the first thing to do is to remain calm. Your veterinarian will need to know as many details as possible: how much was eaten, how long ago, and what were the ingredients? Don’t wait for your pet to show signs of illness before you call for help. In some cases, by the time the pet is acting sick, irreparable damage has already been done. Even if you aren’t absolutely sure that something was eaten, the safe choice is to call for advice. If your veterinarian is not available, you can contact the ASPCA’s (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’) Poison Control Center at 888-426-4435. A fee may be charged for advice, but this organization has extensive information on items and substances that are poisonous to pets. You can also visit the ASPCA Web site http://www.aspca.org/pet-care/poison-control for information.

The holidays can be hectic and exhausting, but in between running around, try to “check in” with your pet at least a few times a day. Make sure he or she is eating and drinking, and, if possible, observe activity level and urination and defecation so that diarrhea or any other changes can be detected quickly. If you notice any signs of illness, including appetite loss, vomiting, diarrhea, tiredness, or discomfort, contact your veterinarian for advice.