

Take the “Oh No!” Out of Your and Your Pets’ Holiday “Ho-Ho-Ho!”

Yes, it’s that holiday time of year again. While you’re busy decorating, baking, wrapping gifts, and preparing your household for guests, remember to watch out for holiday temptations for your pets. Don’t let a pet disaster turn both your and your pets’ Holiday “Ho-Ho-Ho!” into a Holiday “Oh No!”

Pet Treats

Santa brought Fido his favorite pet treats as a stocking stuffer. Lucky Fido! But, be careful when giving Fido his stocking stuffer. Because he likes his favorite treats so much, Fido may eat them whole, or eat too many at one time. Pet treats, whether biscuits, rawhides, or jerky sticks, are most digestible when chewed into small pieces. If Fido eats the treats whole, or eats too many at once, he may not be able to digest them. Un-chewed pet treats can get stuck in the trachea (windpipe) or gastrointestinal tract (esophagus, stomach, and intestines), particularly in small dogs.



If a piece of pet treat gets stuck in Fido’s trachea (windpipe), you may see Fido become frantic and start drooling and choking. Severe tracheal blockages are fairly common, especially around the holidays, and all are life-threatening. So, if you see frantic Fido drooling and choking, he needs an emergency visit to his veterinarian!

If a piece of pet treat gets stuck in Fido’s esophagus (the tube that connects the mouth to the stomach that food travels through), he may gulp, start drooling, or bring up undigested food after eating. Fido brings up the undigested food because the piece of pet treat blocks his dog food from getting to his stomach and there’s nowhere else for the food to go but back up. This can go on for days if the blockage is not removed.

If something is stuck in Fido’s stomach or intestines, such as a bone or chew toy, the symptoms are different and you may not notice for several days. He may vomit and have diarrhea, be less active, not want to eat, and have stomach pain. If the blockage stays in Fido’s stomach or intestines for too long, he may become very ill. The worst-case scenario is when a hole develops at the blockage site, causing a life-threatening infection.

In the cases above, Fido needs a visit to his veterinarian as soon as possible. If he’s choking, it’s an emergency requiring immediate action. When in doubt, contact your veterinarian for medical advice. Your veterinarian may need to take X-rays, use ultrasound, or perform other tests to see what and where the problem is. Your veterinarian may use an endoscope (a long tube with a built-in camera and grabbing tools) to remove reachable objects from the esophagus and stomach. Fido will

likely need surgery to remove blockages in the intestines.

Tinsel and Ribbons

When decorating your tree and wrapping or unwrapping gifts, keep a close eye on where you leave your leftover tinsel, string, and ribbons. Tigger, your big orange and white kitty, may find these decorations irresistible because they look like easy-to-catch, sparkly, and wiggly prey. If Tigger eats these types of decorations, he may end up with serious stomach and intestinal damage. Swallowed ribbons and string can get tangled in the stomach or intestines. If they are not removed, the ribbons and string can saw through the lining of the stomach or intestines, causing a life-threatening infection. Symptoms may take a few hours or several days to appear, and include vomiting, diarrhea, lack of appetite, and decreased activity. If you see Tigger eat any string, tinsel, or ribbon, call your veterinarian and ask for medical advice. Play it safe—keep the tinsel off the tree and collect all ribbons and strings after opening your gifts!



Plants

Many people have festive plants around the house for the holidays, including poinsettias, holly, and mistletoe. Remember to keep your furry family members in mind when you display or dispose of your holiday plants.

Poinsettias

Colorful, large red and white poinsettias fill your living room and family room, bringing holiday cheer to everyone who sees them. However, Tigger sees the poinsettias and considers them a great hiding place and a convenient snack when you're late with his dinner.



Unfortunately, what Tigger doesn't realize is that poinsettias have a milky white, latex sap that can be very irritating to his mouth and stomach. According to the National Animal Poison Control Center (NAPCC), <http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/poison-control/>, symptoms of poinsettia toxicity include drooling, and sometimes, vomiting and diarrhea. Fortunately for Tigger, the symptoms associated with poinsettia toxicity are not too bad. However, if Tigger snacks on your poinsettia leaves, you can help him by picking up his food and water dishes for a couple of hours to let his stomach settle.

Mistletoe

Waiting for a kiss from that special someone under the mistletoe? Tigger or Fido may also be waiting under the mistletoe in hopes of getting a tasty snack. Your horse Trigger may also get a mistletoe snack if you hang it near her stall door or throw it into her field after the holiday celebrations are over. If your pets eat mistletoe, what should you expect? The NAPCC states that the major toxic chemicals in mistletoe are lectins and phoratoxins. These chemicals affect the heart, causing low blood pressure and slowed heart rate. Fortunately for Fido, Tigger, and Trigger, severe mistletoe toxicity is uncommon and usually only occurs if your pet eats a large amount. The symptoms of mistletoe toxicity include gastrointestinal upset (vomiting and diarrhea in dogs and cats; colic in horses), difficulty breathing, slowed heart rate, low blood pressure, and odd behavior. If you suspect Fido, Tigger, or Trigger ate mistletoe, call your veterinarian for medical advice.

Holly

The beautiful holly decorating your house isn't very harmful, but you should still keep Fido, Tigger, and Trigger from eating the berries and leaves. The main toxic culprit in holly leaves and berries is a group of chemicals called saponins. In dogs and cats, these chemicals cause drooling, vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite, and decreased activity. In horses, diarrhea can occur.

In the three cases above, it's a good idea to call your veterinarian. Your veterinarian can give you advice on what you can do at home to make your pet more comfortable and help you decide if you should bring your pet in for a visit.

Table Scraps

It's hard to ignore Fido's sad puppy-dog eyes when you're eating your holiday meals. However, resist the temptation to give him a piece of turkey or chicken, or some other type of fatty holiday comfort food. In addition to the typical gastrointestinal upset (vomiting and diarrhea), rich and fatty foods can cause a potentially life-threatening and painful disease called pancreatitis. The most common symptoms of pancreatitis in dogs include vomiting, stomach pain, restlessness, shaking, diarrhea, fever, and weakness. In cats, the symptoms are less clear and harder to notice, such as decreased appetite and weight loss. Keep Fido and Tigger happy and healthy by resisting the temptation to give them table scraps!



You've done a great job, and neither Fido nor Tigger received any table scraps during your holiday meals. However, disappointed Fido took the opportunity to help himself to the turkey, chicken, and steak bones in the trash can. Eating bones is dangerous to Fido and the dangers are similar to what can happen with unchewed pet treats. Bones can get stuck in his esophagus, leading to gagging, or they can get stuck in his trachea, leading to life-threatening choking. Also, while Fido chews them up, bones form sharp pieces which can injure his mouth, esophagus, and stomach. As the sharp bone pieces travel from the stomach through the intestines, they can cause punctures and injuries along the way, potentially leading to a life-threatening infection. Bone pieces can also get stuck in the stomach and intestines, creating blockages that must be removed.

Hold your ground at dinnertime, and resist the urge to feed Fido and Tigger table scraps. And don't forget, once dinner is done, dispose of the leftovers and bones somewhere where Fido and Tigger can't get to them.

Human Treats

Fido, being the big dog he is, decides that eating the bones and leftovers from the trash can isn't enough for his holiday dinner. So, he table surfs in the living room and eats some of the chocolate-covered caramels in the candy dish along with several sugar-free red and white mints. Can the chocolate and mints hurt him? It depends. Chocolate toxicity depends on the type and amount of chocolate Fido ate, his body weight, and if he's extra-sensitive to the toxic compound in chocolate called theobromine. Theobromine toxicity can cause a variety of symptoms, from mild to severe, including vomiting, diarrhea, fast heart rate, restlessness, hyperactivity, increased urination, muscle spasms, and seizures.

The seemingly harmless sugar-free red and white mints you bought for your diabetic Uncle Ralph can cause life-threatening problems for Fido if the mints contain xylitol. Xylitol, an increasingly popular artificial sweetener, is found in food items such as candy, gum, and baked goods, and personal hygiene products, such as toothpaste and mouthwash. Symptoms occur quickly after dogs eat xylitol-containing items. Vomiting is generally the first symptom, followed by those associated with the sudden lowering of Fido's blood sugar (hypoglycemia), such as decreased activity, weakness, staggering, incoordination, collapse, and seizures. Some dogs develop more severe complications, including liver failure, bleeding disorders, and death. If you suspect Fido has eaten chocolate or xylitol-containing items, consider it an emergency and call your veterinarian immediately.

Alcohol is another potentially harmful human treat. Fido and Tigger decide they need some holiday cheer and drink the entire glass of Aunt Susie's eggnog that she left unattended on the coffee table. Although it may seem funny at the time, pets that consume alcohol can develop serious problems depending on how much they drink. The most common symptoms in pets associated with the con-

sumption of alcoholic beverages are vomiting, diarrhea, incoordination, weakness, decreased activity, difficulty breathing, and shaking. In severe cases, coma and death from respiratory failure (lungs stop functioning) occur. If you see Fido and Tigger drinking an alcoholic beverage, call your veterinarian.

The “Wrap Up”

Don’t let the information in this article scare you into paranoia about your pets and your holiday celebrations. You can relax and enjoy your holidays simply by preventing temptations for your pets. Keep holiday decorations, people food, alcoholic beverages, and holiday plants out of reach of your furry friends. If your pets get into things they shouldn’t, don’t panic! Call your veterinarian **immediately** for advice instead of waiting for serious symptoms to develop. Remember, only **you** can keep the “Oh No!” out of your and your pets’ Holiday “Ho-Ho-Ho!”

How Can You Get More Information?

- Talk to your pet’s veterinarian
- Contact FDA’s Center for Veterinary Medicine at 240-276-9300 or AskCVM@fda.hhs.gov
- Visit the National Animal Poison Control Center (NAPCC) website at: <http://www.aspca.org/pet-care/poison-control/>
- Visit the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) website at: <http://www.avma.org/>

References

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³Ibid.

⁴Cooperative Extension System and University of MD, www.extension.org/faq

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⁶http://www.vet.purdue.edu/vth/SACP/chocolate_toxicity.htm

⁷Dunayer, EK. New Findings on the Effects of Xylitol Ingestion in Dogs. *Veterinary Medicine*. December 2006, pp. 791-797.