

Holiday Toxins Newsletter



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

Tips on holiday foods, plants and decorations that can put your pet at risk

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The holidays are stressful enough without having to worry about a potentially poisoned pet. 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: When decorating for the season, consider your pets. Holiday decorations such as old-fashioned bubble lights may contain poisonous chemicals. If your pet chews on them, the liquid inside could be dangerous to their health. Methylene chloride, the chemical in bubble lights, can result in depression, aspiration pneumonia and irritation to the eyes, skin and gastrointestinal tract.



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 severe linear foreign body if ingested. A linear foreign body occurs when your pet swallows something “stringy” (like ribbon, yarn, tinsel, cassette tape, 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 damage to your pet’s intestinal tract. Ultimately, pets run the risk of severe injury to, or rupture of their intestines and treatment involves expensive 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: 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.



Antifreeze: During this time of the year, it’s important to make sure your pet isn’t ingesting any radiator coolant! Antifreeze can be found in numerous sources. Here in Minnesota, a lot of people put antifreeze into their cabin’s toilet to prevent it from freezing during the winter, and we see a lot of toxicities here at Pet Poison Helpline from dogs running into cabins and drinking out of the toilet. Finally, there are rumors of small amounts of antifreeze in holiday ornaments such as imported snow globes. Recently, some were suspected to contain antifreeze (ethylene glycol) in the liquid. If a snow globe falls off the table and cracks open, and your pet licks up the contents of the snow globe, there is the risk of antifreeze poisoning. As little as one teaspoon of antifreeze when ingested by a cat or a tablespoon or two for a dog (depending on their size), can be fatal. Signs of early poisoning include acting drunk or uncoordinated, excessive thirst, and lethargy. While signs may *seem* to improve after eight to twelve hours, internal damage is actually worsening, and crystals develop in the kidneys resulting in acute kidney failure.

Immediate treatment with an antidote (fomepizole or ethanol) is vital. As the antidote only works if given within the first 3 hours for cats and 8-12 hours for dogs, it’s imperative that you seek veterinary care immediately for blood testing for antifreeze poisoning (including an ethylene glycol test and venous blood gas test).



Plants: Though they have a bad rap, poinsettia plants are only mildly toxic. Far more worrisome are holiday bouquets containing lilies, holly or mistletoe. Even bouquets brought into the house by holiday guests should be thoroughly inspected, as lilies are the #1 flower often used by florists. Just one or two bites from a lily can result in severe acute kidney failure in cats – even the pollen is thought to be poisonous! When in doubt, don't let these bouquets in a cat-loving household!



Other yuletide plants such as holly berries, mistletoe, and rosemary 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 lip smack, 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 of it. Mild signs of gastrointestinal irritation are seen, although if ingested in large amounts, collapse, hypotension, ataxia (walking drunk), seizures and death have also been reported.

Recently, florists have started to use Japanese Yew to make wreaths – all parts of this evergreen (including the succulent, red berries) are very poisonous, as they contain taxines, bioflavonoids and cyanogenic glycosides. If ingested, this *Taxus* species can result in dizziness, 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. 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 volvulus (twisted stomach). Signs of this include vomiting, non-productive retching, a 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 is 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:

- Foods containing **grapes, raisins and currants** (such as fruit cakes) 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.

When it comes to the holidays, the best thing a pet owner can do is get educated on common household toxins and pet-proof your home 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.

Resources: Pet Poison Helpline, an animal poison control center based out of Minneapolis, is available 24 hours, 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 fee of **\$39.00** per incident includes follow-up consultations for the duration of the poison case. Pet Poison Helpline is available in North America by calling 800-213-6680. Additional information can be found online at www.petpoisonhelpline.com.