

Looking after your pets this Christmas....

by Emma Sinclair, from Chobham Road Vets in Sunningdale

Christmas can be a busy and chaotic time of year, when we fill our houses with large quantities of delicious food and leave presents under the tree, both of which may prove all too tempting for our curious four-legged friends. Most pet owners are aware that chocolate is poisonous to their pets. However, at this time of year in particular, there are a number of other potential dangers lurking in and around the home, which are well worth knowing about so that you can take steps to keep your pet out of danger.

Chocolate

If there are pets in the household over Christmas, do not put any chocolate on or under the Christmas tree as the temptation may prove too great, and make sure all visitors know it mustn't be given as a treat. Chocolate contains a powerful stimulant called theobromine (similar to caffeine) which can cause hyper excitability, vomiting and diarrhoea and in more severe cases can cause convulsions or an abnormal heart rhythm.



Grapes, Raisins or Sultanas

Grapes and their dried products (currants, raisins and sultanas) are toxic to dogs and cats, and with mince pies and Christmas cake around, the potential for ingestion is higher than normal at this time of year. There appears to be no correlation between the quantity ingested and the clinical effects – in some animals, ingestion of a small quantity can cause kidney failure, so they should be avoided completely.

Onions

Onions, along with garlic, leeks and chives, belong to the *Allium* species of plants. They can cause toxicity whether raw, cooked or dried. It can take a few days for signs to occur – initially they can cause vomiting or diarrhoea but the main effect is damage to red blood cells resulting in anaemia. Lots of savoury foods contain onions – one to be aware of at Christmas is sage and onion stuffing.

Macadamia Nuts

Ingestion of macadamia nuts can cause signs including lethargy, increased body temperature, tremors, joint pain and vomiting.

Chewing gum and sweeteners

Xylitol is a food additive used as an artificial sweetener; cases of xylitol toxicity usually occur as a result of ingesting chewing gum, sweets and cakes baked with sugar substitute products. Ingestion can cause hypoglycaemia (low blood sugar level) which, depending

on the severity, can cause anything from drowsiness and a staggering gait to convulsions and collapse. It can also have adverse effects on the liver.

Leftover Food

If you have any leftovers after Christmas, be sure to dispose of them carefully – mouldy food can contain toxins that are capable of causing seizures.

Bones

Whilst they don't fall into the category of being poisonous, bones certainly present a hazard to pets. Turkey and chicken bones easily splinter when chewed, especially when cooked, and can fragment into pieces with very sharp edges. If swallowed, these can cause damage to the gastrointestinal tract and can sometimes become stuck and require surgery to be removed.

Lillies

All parts of lily plants are highly toxic to cats (not dogs). Cats can be affected by eating any part of the plant, but also if they brush against the flower and get pollen on their coats which they subsequently ingest when grooming themselves. Signs develop rapidly following ingestion, and can include vomiting, inappetence and excessive thirst and urination – however, if you suspect your cat has been exposed don't wait for these signs as intensive early treatment before the onset of kidney failure offers the best chance of a successful outcome.



Anti-freeze (ethylene glycol)

The sweet taste of ethylene glycol unfortunately means that it can be attractive to pets, and ingestion of just a small amount is toxic. Unfortunately, the prognosis for animals which have ingested ethylene glycol is extremely poor and so the best advice is to avoid exposure – never add anti-freeze to ponds, always keep it in labelled, well-sealed containers, and always clean up any spills immediately, however small.

Batteries

Accidental ingestion of batteries is more common at this time of year. If the battery is chewed and pierced, it can cause chemical burns and heavy metal poisoning. If they are swallowed whole, it is possible they can cause a blockage. Christmas should be a wonderful time of year, but sadly over the festive season vets often see an increase in the number of animals visiting them with entirely preventable illnesses caused by something they have eaten. Hopefully, by increasing awareness of some of the more common poisons, we can help make Christmas memorable for all the right reasons. If you are concerned your pet has eaten something they shouldn't have done, then please contact your vet straight away – early treatment is often the only way to prevent potentially devastating consequences.