

Common Holiday Hazards

Keep Your Pet Safe This Season

THE HOLIDAY SEASON IS APPROACHING FAST!

For many, the next few months will focus on family, friends, and good cheer. But for your furriest family members, the holidays may bring unfamiliar faces, loud noises, and the temptation to eat potentially hazardous things. Knowing what to look out for and the steps to take in an emergency can help ensure that, for both you and your pet, this really is the most wonderful time of the year.

CHOCOLATE

Although it poses a well-known danger to pets, chocolate remains one of the most highly reported pet toxicities. In fact, the Animal Poison Control Center (APCC) of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals addressed 17,540 chocolate toxicity cases in 2017, or about 48 per day.

Chocolate becomes a heightened concern during the holiday season because of the increased volume of candies, baked goods, and chocolate-covered treats in the home. During the week of Halloween, calls to the Pet Poison Helpline—most regarding pets accidentally ingesting candy—increase by 12%, making it the center's busiest time of year.

DECOR

The final few months of the year are brimming with opportunities to decorate your home. Unfortunately, for pets, some decorations look like toys and could lead to injury.

One major culprit: tinsel. Shiny and stringlike, this is a major temptation for cats—and a major threat. Because tinsel is thin and sharp, it can be swallowed easily and become lodged in a cat's stomach and unable to pass through the intestines. Most veterinarians recommend skipping the tinsel if you have a cat in your home.

Pet owners who celebrate Christmas should anchor the tree securely so it cannot tip over, potentially injuring a pet. Also, keep an eye on the water in their tree's stand. Some pets lap up the stagnant water, which is a breeding ground for bacteria, and can quickly become ill.

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NOISE

From a pet's perspective, many holiday traditions aren't exciting—they're scary. On Halloween, for example, you might rejoice in the stream of costume-clad trick-or-treaters at the door, but your pet just notices that the doorbell has rung dozens of times, only to reveal odd-looking strangers each time. This can result in unexpected aggression or an attempted escape through the open door. The best way to avoid this stress is to put your pet in a secure crate or a room as far away as possible from the front door.

On New Year's Eve, the fireworks that mark the start of a fresh year produce an unwelcome barrage of noise that may send your dog into hiding. If you know that your dog or cat suffers from noise aversion or anxiety, speak with your veterinarian about extra measures you can take to ensure your pet gets through the next few weeks unscathed.



XYLITOL

It's very likely that the sugar-free sweetener xylitol lurks in your pantry. A common ingredient in baked goods, gum, and even peanut butter, the additive is particularly dangerous for dogs. Xylitol can cause their blood sugar to drop and even lead to liver failure. Although you can check the ingredient list of the foods you serve or prepare at home, it's best to keep all baked goods out of your pet's reach.

PLANTS

It's widely believed that poinsettias are toxic to pets, but that's not entirely true. Although eating large amounts of the plant has the potential to sicken an animal, mistletoe and holly are actually much more toxic. If ingested, either plant could lead to vomiting, diarrhea, and heart arrhythmia in both dogs and cats.

Likewise, Halloween decorations such as pumpkins and cornstalks can cause gastrointestinal upset or intestinal blockage, and jack-o'-lanterns or other decorations with lit candles could burn a curious pet. So be sure to keep a watchful eye on your pet—or use alternative decorations.



GUESTS

You may look forward to the parties and excitement of the season, but that doesn't mean your furry friend does. In fact, your cat or dog is probably not a party animal at all. Unfamiliar faces may increase your pet's level of anxiety or aggression and pose a safety risk. Also, guests entering and exiting your home may not notice your pet slipping out the door behind them.

To help prevent mishaps, tell visitors in advance that you have a pet. You should also set up a comfortable, quiet place as retreat for your cat or dog if the socializing becomes too overwhelming. Don't forget to check in on her from time to time.

If you host overnight guests, be leery of their medications. Yours likely are properly stored away, but visitors may leave pills in their suitcase or on a nightstand where pets can access them easily. This applies to prescription and over-the-counter medications, supplements, and vitamins. Last year, the APCC received nearly 35,000 calls about the accidental ingestion of medications.

BE PREPARED

You don't have to choose between having a pet and having a good time this holiday season, but being a responsible pet owner means taking precautions to keep your pet happy and healthy well into the new year. If, despite your best efforts, you suspect that your cat or dog has ingested a potentially toxic decoration or food item, immediately call a pet poison hotline, such as the APCC (888-426-4435) or Pet Poison Helpline (855-764-7661). Specially trained staff can help identify what your pet ingested and alert you to any danger. If you notice that your pet seems sick or acts odd, don't hesitate to contact your veterinarian. ■



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