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Holiday Hazards and Your Pets

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The holiday season has arrived and brings not only celebrations, presents, and decorations but also concerns for pet safety. There are many dangers to be aware of as you begin to celebrate this year. These include specific types of plants, certain foods, and even decorations.

Chocolate is in great abundance during many holiday celebrations and is a well-known toxin. If ingested it can cause mild signs, such as vomiting and diarrhea, but can also cause more serious signs such as seizures and even death. The stronger the chocolate, the more serious the ingestion can be--eating baking cocoa is more serious than eating milk chocolate. Keep chocolate away from anywhere your pets may get it and call your veterinarian right away if your pet does eat some. They can generally help determine if the amount eaten will cause issues.

Grapes and raisins are used in many holiday recipes and if given to a pet can cause kidney failure and even death. Make sure to not feed your pet any holiday sweets with raisins or grapes in them and remind your guests they are toxic to pets. The specific toxin in grapes has not been identified yet so any ingestion is cause for concern. Tinsel is a common decoration used on many a Christmas tree but this shiny item can cause a problem if ingested, specifically in cats. The long thread type material looks like a toy to a cat and if the cat eats it, it can get stuck in the stomach or intestines, requiring emergency lifesaving surgery.

Xylitol is a sugar alternative found in low-fat sweets, gums, peanut butter, and even recipes. Xylitol can cause an animal's blood sugar to drop which may make your pet have a seizure. It can also cause severe damage to the liver. Not all pets survive xylitol

ingestion and those that do require intensive care and hospitalization.

There are many plants we see during the holidays that can cause issues with pets. Lilies are extremely toxic to cats and cause kidney failure, so keep those out of their reach. Holly and mistletoe can cause vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, and in very rare cases, seizures, and death. Poinsettias are actually not that toxic, despite the hype, and generally just cause mild GI upset. It is a good idea to keep plants in places where pets cannot get to them and chew them.

Some holiday hazards are overlooked, including open flames and electric cords. During the holiday season many people light multiple candles and put them in places pets, especially cats, can reach. If a pet comes into contact with an open flame, fur can quickly set on fire causing burns and potential lung damage. Consider keeping candles in places your pets cannot get to them or using decorative candle shades. Many people will also use decorative lights inside and outside their house, which means there will be electrical cords in many places. Puppies and kittens are curious and may chew on them, which can cause fluid accumulation in the lungs from electric shock. Keep wires taped down and use protective cases when possible.

These are just a few of the holiday hazards facing our pets this season. If you have any concerns or questions about your pets and the holidays, please contact your veterinarian. If your pet eats something and you are not sure if it is toxic call your veterinarian office or poison control right away.

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The Vermont Veterinary Medical Association (VVMA) is a professional organization of 380 veterinarians dedicated to compassionate animal care and quality medicine.