

Five Holiday Hazards for Pets



By Jessi Hamilton Seid, DVM

angell.org/urgentcare

urgentcare@angell.org

781-902-8400

January 2022

The holidays are a joyous time when we gather with friends and family to celebrate the season. With all the activity around the holidays, it can be easy to overlook the things around the home that could potentially be hazardous to our pets. Below is a list of common holiday hazards for pet owners to watch out for.

1. Toxic Holiday Foods

Many holiday food staples are toxic to our furry friends. Food items including chocolate, raisins/grapes, fat trimmings/bones, alcohol/yeast dough, xylitol-containing treats, and macadamia nuts pose a potential risk to our pets and are commonplace around the holidays.

- *Chocolate* contains toxic chemicals called methylxanthines, resulting in vomiting, diarrhea, hyperactivity/agitation, elevated heart rate, abnormal heart rhythms, and even seizures. The darker the chocolate, the bigger the risk of toxicity, so baking chocolate and gourmet high-percentage dark chocolates pose the highest risk, while white chocolate has the least risk.



- *Raisins/grapes* can be present in numerous holiday treats. Ingestion can result in acute kidney failure.
- *Fat trimmings/bones* from our holiday feasts can cause vomiting/diarrhea and pancreatitis. Bones also risk resulting in obstruction or perforation of the bowel requiring surgery.
- *Alcohol* can result in vomiting, diarrhea, incoordination, central nervous system depression, trouble breathing, coma, and even death. Another potential source of alcohol is uncooked yeast dough. When ingested, this

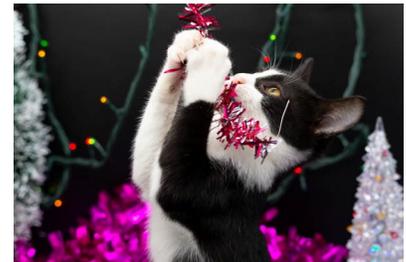
dough creates alcohol in the body and expands, resulting in bloating the stomach, leading to a life-threatening emergency.

- *Xylitol* is a common artificial sweetener used in human foods such as gum, breads, and cookies. In dogs, the ingestion of xylitol can result in severe hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), liver failure, neurological abnormalities, and even death if not treated emergently.
- *Macadamia nuts* can cause weakness, depression, vomiting, tremors, and hyperthermia. Symptoms usually appear within 12 hours of ingestion and are normally self-limiting, resolving in 24-48 hours.

2. Ornaments and Ribbon/Tinsel

Ingestion of ornaments can result in injury to the mouth and throat. The decorations can also get stuck in the gastrointestinal tract, resulting in a bowel obstruction, requiring surgery.

For some reason, cats especially appear to be drawn to the beautiful ribbons and sparkly tinsel abundant around the holidays. Ingestion of ribbon and tinsel can result in bowel obstruction and, in most cases, requires surgery for removal.



3. Toxic Holiday Plants

Lilies are a common flower in many holiday arrangements. Unfortunately, the flowers, pollen, and plant material are very toxic to cats and can result in acute kidney injury if ingested. Cat owners should carefully inspect all floral arrangements before bringing them into the home to ensure no lilies are present, and if there is any question, the safest option is not to bring flowers home at all.



Most people are aware that poinsettias are toxic, but the good news is that the poinsettias commonly available today only cause mild to moderate gastrointestinal irritation if ingested. Other common holiday plants, including holly and mistletoe, can result in gastrointestinal upset (vomiting, diarrhea, nausea) and cardiovascular issues if ingested.

4. Homemade Play Dough/Salt Ornaments and Ice Melt

A popular holiday craft item, homemade play dough/salt ornaments, contains high concentrations of salt (sodium chloride), which, if ingested, can result in symptoms ranging from gastrointestinal upset to life-threatening electrolyte imbalances and neurological symptoms, including tremors and seizures. In many areas of the country, including Massachusetts, snow is a regular occurrence around this time. Many standard ice melt products are made from salt, so ingestion of ice melts by pets can result in similar symptoms to homemade playdough/salt ornaments. Luckily many commercially



available ice melts are pet friendly which owners use to avoid the risk of these life-threatening side-effects, but these products can still result in vomiting and diarrhea.

5. Holiday Lights and Wires



Holiday lights and electrical cords are tempting items for pets to chew on, especially for those mischievous puppies and kittens. Biting electrical cords and wires can result in severe burns in the mouth and even a life-threatening build-up of fluid in the lungs. Signs that may indicate your pet may have chewed on an electrical cord (even without observing the event) and prompt further investigation could include drooling, not wanting to eat, coughing, lethargy, or trouble breathing. Keeping cords hidden or covered to prevent access and using playpen-style pet/child fencing to restrict access to things like Christmas trees can help prevent these dangerous exposures.

These are just some of the common holiday hazards to pets present around the home for pet owners to consider. As always, if an owner observes or suspects that their pet has gotten into something that they shouldn't have, they should consult their veterinarian for further advisement. If the exposure is a food, plant, or medication, then the Animal Poison Control hotline is also an invaluable resource for owners to obtain guidance.