

# A Matter of Life and Death

Your pet's well-being depends  
on how carefully you keep toxic  
substances out of reach

BY STEPHANIE ANDERSON WITMER

**PETS ARE CONSIDERED** members of the family in many U.S. households, and they have even more in common with their littlest human buddies — toddlers and pre-schoolers — than you might think. None of them can read, none comprehends mortality and none thinks twice before downing a carelessly placed bottle of antidepressants.

While parents generally try to stay one step ahead when it comes to their children and toxic hazards, pet owners should take many of the same precautions. Is your blood pressure medication on the desk where your golden retriever can get to it? Did you pick up all the ibuprofen tablets you dropped on the floor, or are there a few stray ones that may catch the attention of your playful Siamese? »





## ALWAYS CALL

Common sense and vigilance will help prevent many cases of accidental poisoning, but if you suspect your pet has ingested something toxic, err on the side of caution and call your vet right away, says ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center medical director Dr. Tina Wismer, a veterinarian.

"We don't want to wait until the animal is having problems," she says, "because then it could be too late. Some toxins act within minutes, but some, like rat and mouse poisons, take three to five days until we start to see a problem. Always call."

For more information, go to [aspc.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control](http://aspc.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control).

In an emergency, call your vet or the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at **1-888-426-4435** (a \$65 consultation fee is charged that covers the initial call and all follow-up calls).



**LAST YEAR ALONE**, the Animal Poison Control Center — run by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) — fielded almost 180,000 calls concerning pets that were exposed to or that had ingested potentially toxic substances. Many cases could have been prevented if owners had been more proactive.

THINKSTOCK

## *Toxic to Pets: Plants*

Here is a list of some foods and plants that can be harmful to pets, according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. For more details on each, go to [aspc.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control](http://aspc.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control).



LILIES



MARIJUANA



SAGO PALM



TULIP/  
NARCISSUS  
BULBS



AZALEA/  
RHODO-  
DENDRON



OLEANDER



CASTOR  
BEAN



Those who answer the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center hotline, based in Urbana, Ill., know some calls will end in heartbreak. In February, Dr. Caroline Donaldson, a veterinarian, received a call from a clinic about a 4-year-old, 40-pound basset hound who had chewed into a bottle of the owner's over-the-counter diet pills and eaten 35 of them.

Each pill contained a potent blend of caffeine and cocoa extract (cocoa contains both caffeine and theobromine, a naturally occurring alkaloid that behaves like a stimulant).

The dog was "profoundly symptomatic" by the time Donaldson got the call three hours later. Its body temperature had risen to 106 degrees (a dog's normal range is 100 to 102.5 degrees), and its heart rate had skyrocketed.

While the veterinary team did everything it could, Donaldson says, the dog had ingested a lethal dose of caffeine, and died later that day. "The reality is, some exposures are so bad, it's not a good outcome," Donaldson says.

Overall, medications

were involved in the highest percentage of calls to the center in 2013:

► Human prescription medications — including blood pressure drugs (the most common), antidepressants and pain relievers — prompted the most calls, nearly 20 percent, according to the ASPCA.

► Over-the-counter medications and supplements accounted for almost 15 percent of the calls. Common pain relievers such as ibuprofen, naproxen and acetaminophen, even in small quantities, can be lethal to pets.

► Ingested veterinary medications, particularly the chewable kind that taste good, also resulted in calls to the center.

Dogs are more likely than cats to chomp into a bottle of pills and consume the lot, according to the poison control center's medical director, Dr. Tina Wismer. Cats, however, are attracted to small objects that move and skitter, such as a pill dropped on a kitchen floor. And because a cat is usually smaller than a dog, one pill may be more than enough to cause serious damage, Wismer says.

**CHOCOLATE ALONE IS** responsible for some 26 calls to the hotline each day. During what Wismer refers to as "chocolate season," which extends from Halloween through Easter, calls increase by 10 percent just before and just after a holiday.

For owners worrying about whether or not a situation is serious enough to warrant a call to the center, there's a simple response: Always call.

Ironically, dark chocolate, which has gained popularity due to its reported health benefits for humans, has resulted in more dangerous cases of poisoning in animals. "The American palate has changed," says Wismer. "Dark chocolate is three times as toxic as milk chocolate, so we're seeing more serious toxicities, simply because we have more dark chocolate around."

Veterinary assistant and ASPCA poison control hotline operator Alexandra Pinteá received a call in December 2013 from a woman who came home to discover that her cat »

## THE TOP 10 HAZARDS

The following substances prompted the most calls to the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center in 2013. Human medications again topped the list, with almost 20 percent of calls involving drugs such as high blood pressure medication and pain pills.

1. Prescription human medications
2. Insecticides
3. Over-the-counter human medications
4. Household items, from cleaning products to paint
5. Human food (other than chocolate) that is toxic to animals
6. Veterinary medications
7. Chocolate
8. Rodenticides
9. Plants (more calls involve cats being exposed to houseplants)
10. Lawn and garden products



CYCLAMEN



KALANCHOE



YEW



AMARYLLIS



AUTUMN CROCUS



CHRYSANTHEMUM



ENGLISH IVY



PEACE LILY (AKA MAUNA LOA PEACE LILY)



POTHOS



SCHEFFLERA

## SAFE PRACTICES

When storing and taking medication, follow these tips from the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center to keep your pets safe:

- ▶ Take pills while standing over a sink or in the bathroom with the door closed — anywhere your pet is not.
- ▶ Don't place a pill on a table for a child or other family member to take with a meal.
- ▶ Store medications and supplements in a medicine cabinet or lockbox, not on a counter or vanity.
- ▶ Store human and pet medications separately, as they can be easily confused.
- ▶ Keep a tally of how many pills are in a bottle or pill organizer. If your pet eats some, it will be easier for the vet to determine proper treatment if you know how many were ingested.

and her 70-pound German shepherd dog had teamed up to scarf down 2 pounds of dark chocolate peppermint bark.

Compared to milk or white chocolate, dark chocolate has higher levels of theobromine, which can affect an animal's kidneys and central nervous system. Chocolate itself also poses a risk of pancreatitis due to its high fat and sugar content, Pintea says. The owner took the dog to the vet to induce vomiting, and the cat later vomited on its own at home.

Pintea didn't receive an update on the animals, but she expects they're both fine. The dog's large size was a blessing in this case. "It was a lot of chocolate," she says, "but if it had been a 2-pound Chihuahua, it would've been much worse."

Other "people" foods besides chocolate can create hazards for pets. According to the ASPCA, the most dangerous foods include onions, garlic, the sweetener xylitol, raisins, grapes, coffee, avocado and macadamia nuts.

Another substance to be mindful of is bread dough made with yeast, which is often left on a kitchen counter to rise well within reach of a big, curious dog. If swallowed, the dough will continue to expand in a dog's stomach (in some cases, to the point of rupture) and the yeast will produce alcohol, resulting in "drunk, bloated dogs," Wismer says. If your dog consumes raw dough, get

*Many calls concerning cats are related to them licking or even rubbing up against poisonous plants.*

him to the vet.

Dogs are a bit more likely to get into trouble than our feline friends. Of the 141 different dog breeds whose owners or vets called the hotline last year, the breed that prompted the most calls was the Labrador retriever (who also topped the list in 2012). Wismer attributes this to the sheer number of Labs (the No. 1 breed in the U.S. for years) as well as its

size. And "being retrievers, they're very mouthy dogs, too," she says.

While cats don't chew quite as much as dogs, their tendency to lick can get them into trouble, Wismer says. Many calls concerning cats are related to them licking or even rubbing up against poisonous plants.

Two plants top Wismer's list of toxic houseplants: Easter and other true lilies, which can cause deadly kidney failure in cats, and sago palms, which can cause liver failure in both cats and dogs.

**FOR OWNERS WORRYING** about whether or not a situation is serious enough to warrant a call to the center, there's a simple response: Always call. It could save your pet's life.

In December 2013, veterinary technician and hotline operator Erin Clifford received a call from a woman who'd caught her small, mixed-breed dog licking a skin patch that contained the powerful pain medication fentanyl.

## Toxic to Pets: Foods



CHOCOLATE,  
COFFEE,  
CAFFEINE



ALCOHOL



AVOCADO



MILK



GRAPES &  
RAISINS



YEAST  
DOUGH



RAW/UNDER-  
COOKED  
MEAT, EGGS  
AND BONES



XYLITOL



ONIONS,  
GARLIC,  
CHIVES



MACADAMIA  
NUTS



SALT

THINKSTOCK



Patches may be a convenient way to administer medication to humans, but their small size, plus the fact that used ones may taste salty from a person's skin, can make them tantalizing to pets.

The woman called her vet, who told her not to worry. Unconvinced, she called Poison Control.

"It turned out to be a good thing she called us," Clifford says. "By the time she called us, the dog was starting to show central nervous system signs." In less than an hour, the dog began stumbling around as if it were drunk. Clifford told the woman to take the dog to the vet for treatment, which she did.

A few days later, the owner called to thank Clifford and the center for helping her dog, who's now fully recovered. She was so grateful that she and her husband donated money to the ASPCA instead of exchanging Christmas gifts.

Clifford credits the owner's proactive approach for the positive outcome: "She went with her gut instinct. Sometimes a second opinion can be life-saving."

**COMMON HOUSEHOLD ITEMS** also pose hazards. Specialty soaps, for instance, may add a little luxury at bath time, but they're not so benign when it comes to animals. Take the interest shown

by a 13-pound Cavalier King Charles spaniel, who swallowed an entire bar of handmade specialty soap.

"Sometimes soaps smell like food," says Donaldson, who took the call that was placed by an emergency veterinary clinic late one night in February. "To dogs, they smell really good, like you should be eating them."

The detergents in soap get us clean, but, when

swallowed, they can cause pulmonary edema (fluid accumulation in the lungs) as well as gastrointestinal irritation.

Soap's frothy bubbles may also be aspirated into the lungs and cause pneumonia.

The spaniel developed pneumonia and was put on round-the-clock oxygen for breathing problems, but was expected to recover. ●



## TASTY TECH

We humans love our gadgets — and our pets do, too. A 2013 survey conducted by the electronics-protection company SquareTrade found that pets have damaged more than 8 million devices, resulting in \$3 billion worth of repair and replacement costs.

Two-thirds of the incidents involved pets putting gadgets in their mouths, according to the study, with a smartphone being the most commonly abused device. Mobile phones and remote controls, in fact, may seem especially appetizing to dogs if they have food residue on them.

Dogs have also been known to chow down on hearing aids and electronic toys.

The batteries inside all those electronic devices are the biggest concern for pets, says veterinarian Dr. Tina Wismer, medical director of the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center, which sees an uptick in ingested batteries around the winter holidays.

"A battery's alkaline substance can cause burns in the mouth and stomach," Wismer says. If batteries end up in the stomach, surgery may be required.

And remember that pets who chew on electric cords risk electrocution, while small wires that are swallowed may lodge in the digestive tract.