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Tips to Make the Holidays Happy for Your Pets

By M. Kathleen Shaw DVM, Vermont Veterinary Medical Association

The holiday season is here and there are many things you can do to help keep your pets happy and healthy. After all, nothing spoils good cheer like an urgent trip to the veterinary clinic. (To play it safe, make sure you have your vet's phone number handy, along with directions to the emergency clinic. Also include ASPCA Poison Control Center (888-426-4435) and the Pet Poison Helpline (855-764-7661).

We all love to give our pets treats, and likely any visitors to your home will want to share holiday treats with them, too. Unfortunately, many people foods are especially dangerous for our pets. Chocolate is toxic as is any food containing the artificial sweetener xylitol (which has been linked to liver failure and death in dogs). Table scraps and any extra rich foods can be hard for pets to digest leading to vomiting, diarrhea, and pancreatitis. Many foods that are good for us are poisonous for pets: grapes, raisins, and onions are a few. Another little-known hazardous food is unbaked yeast dough, which can cause painful gas and potentially dangerous bloating. To be safe, simply refrain from people food and stick to treats that are specifically formulated for your pet.

Holiday decorations are pretty but they can be a tempting toy or snack for our pets. Ornaments can break and cause injuries, and can cause intestinal blockage or stomach upset (especially those made of salt-based dough). Tinsel, ribbons, and other decorative items can cause choking or intestinal blockage. Ribbon especially is extremely tempting for cats of all ages to eat, leading to potential intestinal perforation and death. Electric lights can cause burns when a curious pet chews on the electrical cords. Bitter apple spray "no chew" spray, or even some dish soap on the cords can help deter this behavior. Cat owners (especially those who have young cats) will tell you from experience that trees can tip over as they try to climb the tree or play with

ornaments. If in doubt about the stability of your tree, tie it to the ceiling or a door frame to secure it. For some reason, our pets love to drink the Christmas tree water (while a fresh bowl of water awaits them elsewhere). Monitor them closely if you have added anything to the water, as those additives can make them sick.

Candles and oil lamps are pretty, but do not leave your pet alone in an area without them- it could result in a fire. Curious cats, especially are at risk of not only catching themselves on fire, but also your home. There are many plants and flowers that can be dangerous to pets who want to nibble on them, including poinsettias, amaryllis, mistletoe, balsam, pine, cedar, and holly. The ASPCA website offers lists of plants that are toxic to dogs and cats. A little-known toxin for our pets is liquid potpourris: they contain essential oils and other ingredients that can badly damage your pet's mouth, eyes, and skin.

If you see or suspect your pet has eaten something it should not have (signs include depression, pain, loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhea, or changes in behavior.) call your veterinarian or nearest veterinary emergency clinic immediately. You may also want to call the ASPCA Poison Control Center (888-426-4435) or the Pet Poison Helpline (855-764-7661); note that a fee may apply.

Company over the holidays be stressful even for normally outgoing pets, too. Make sure all pets have a comfortable, quiet place indoors where they can retreat. Make sure this place is just for your pets, away from the children or introverts at your gathering who may want to follow. Make sure all guests know ahead of time that you have pets and watch the exits so stressed pets do not bolt out the door.

We all want you to have a happy holiday season with your pets. Common sense and keeping a close eye on your pets around the holiday food and decorations will help keep them safe. For more information, visit the American Veterinary Medical Association website: avma.org to read more about winter holiday pet safety.

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