

Introduction

Christmas is a time to celebrate with family and friends, including our four-legged family members. Each festive season we see some little mishaps, and we thought we would prepare an information guide about the special risks holidays impose, to ensure your pet(s) will be safe and enjoy themselves too.

Tinsel strands seem to be very attractive to cats and these will often cause severe problems, often requiring surgery if they are eaten. For some reason, almost every season a dog or cat in our practice eats a Christmas tree ornament or even one of the light bulbs off the tree. Chewing on the extension cords to the tree lights or the electric train around the tree sometimes leads to problems, too.

The abundance of food found at holiday tables also presents a danger. It's hard to resist a wagging tail and a pair of big, brown, begging eyes...and there is no reason why you cannot feed table scraps to your dog, but please read on. Whilst cats tend to be more fussy than dogs with what they eat, the information provided below also applies to cats!

Feeding table scraps or other human foods to pets indiscriminately is dangerous. Some human foods may cause digestive problems, and some can even be life-threatening. The key is to identify which human food is good, and which is not.

We have listed some not-so-good and even dangerous human food. The lists below are understandably not complete - they only show some of the most common foods that we have at home. The bottom line? Always exercise common sense and caution when considering human food for your pets.

Common human foods that should not be given at all include:

Chocolate

Chocolate contains caffeine and theobromine, both of which can over-stimulate the central nervous system and cause serious, even life-threatening, health problems. The general rule of thumb with chocolate is that the darker it is, the more dangerous it is. You also need to take into account the size of your pet and the amount of chocolate eaten.



Grapes, Sultanas and Raisins

A mere handful of these can cause a lot of damage. Christmas pudding is off the list! In large quantities, raisins, sultanas or grapes can cause acute kidney failure and even death.

Onions

A compound found in onions (and in lesser amount in garlic) called n-propylsulfide can, in large doses, cause oxidative damage to red blood cells and resulting haemolytic anaemia, in which the red blood cells burst while they're circulating through the body. Initial symptoms include vomiting and diarrhea, followed by lethargy, dark urine, and trouble breathing. The full affect of the poisoning won't be felt until a few days after onions were eaten. Again, both the size of the pet and the amount of onion eaten are important factors.

Salty Foods

Processed foods, such as sausages, deli meat, and canned soup, contain a lot of salt. Too much salt can cause electrolyte imbalance, kidney disease, and seizures.

Sweet Desserts

Although many pets have a sweet tooth and enjoy desserts like pie, cake, and ice cream, sugary foods should not be given to your pet. These foods have no nutritional benefits and can cause diabetes!

Fatty Foods

Never feed fatty scraps to your pets. Their pancreas is overstimulated to digest the excess fat and sugar and can trigger pancreatitis. This is a serious, and sometimes life threatening condition and requires hospitalisation, and intravenous fluids to help settle the inflamed pancreas. Pancreatitis – and its sister condition gastroenteritis, or inflammation of the stomach – can be caused by fatty foods of all types, whether they come from the table or from a garbage can.

Alcohol

All kinds of alcoholic drinks (e.g. beer, wine, cocktail) are extremely hazardous to pets because they are highly susceptible to alcohol's toxic effects. Alcoholic drinks can cause vomiting, diarrhea, lethargy and liver failure.

Xylitol

Xylitol is a sweetener that is contained in many sugar-free gums, breath mints, candies and some baked goods. Xylitol is dangerous to dogs because it triggers a sudden release of insulin, causing hypoglycemia. This can result in shock and liver failure. It is therefore extremely important that you keep your sugar-free gums or any other foods containing xylitol out of your dog's reach.

Cooked Bones

Whilst it may be very appealing to spoil your pet by giving them leftover pork or ham bones, or the turkey or chicken carcass....please do not do this. Please ensure they cannot raid the garbage bin too! Cooked bones can splinter and get stuck in your pets bowel needing surgical removal, or at the very least can cause severe constipation. Only raw bones should be fed to your pets.



In addition to food and decorations, pets sometimes have a really hard time adjusting to the increases in family activity around the holidays. They may not handle the stress of house guests well. Often just scheduling a few minutes at approximately the same time each day to spend playing with your dog or reviewing those obedience exercises can make the holidays a lot easier for an anxious dog. Cats are a little harder to reassure and it is sometimes best just to make sure they have a safe haven in the house where the guests can't find them, especially the very young guests. Make sure their litter box is private, too.

If you are going to board your pet for the holidays make sure their vaccinations are current well before the time for boarding and check to see if there are special vaccination requirements at the boarding kennel. Make sure you have all the contact numbers for wherever you will be written down for the kennel, pet sitter or veterinary hospital. You might even consider giving your veterinarian written permission to treat your pets in your absence.