

Holiday Safety Tips for Dogs

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

We want the holidays to be a happy time for you and your pet, not a time for an emergency visit to your veterinarian. The food and decorations that make the holidays so much fun for us can be dangerous for your pet. We do not want this article to dampen your holiday spirits, but we do want you to be aware of the dangers and plan carefully to avoid these potential hazards.

Food - Related Items

Holiday foods we enjoy cooking and eating can be a problem for your pet.

Rich, fatty foods, like gravy or grease, can cause problems ranging from stomach upsets to pancreatitis, which is an inflammation of the pancreas resulting in pain, vomiting, and dehydration. Dogs with this serious condition often require hospitalization for treatment.

Alcohol can cause serious intoxications in pets, and many dogs are attracted to it. Every year hundreds of dogs die after a single bout of alcohol consumption. Clean up glasses after holiday parties. Dogs are often attracted by the sweet taste of drinks, especially eggnog.

[Chocolate](#), coffee, and tea all contain dangerous components called xanthines, which cause nervous system or urinary system damage and heart muscle stimulation. Chocolate, with theobromine, is especially a problem because dogs love its flavor. Problems from ingestion range from diarrhea to seizures and death.

Unsweetened baking chocolate and dark chocolate are the worst culprits, but all chocolate, fudge, and other candy should be placed out of your dog's reach.

Uncooked meat, fish, and poultry can contain disease-causing bacteria, such as *E. coli*, and parasites such as [Toxoplasma gondii](#). These uncooked foods should not be given to your dog. For your own health, as well as your pet's, wash utensils that have been in contact with raw meat, and cook meat thoroughly.

Bones from fish, meat, or poultry can also cause problems if swallowed. Even small bones can splinter causing lacerations (tearing) throughout the intestinal tract. So, no matter how big or how little they are, be sure to keep bones (other than those that are specially sterilized and treated) away from your dog. Rawhides, Kong toys, and hardened, sterilized bones would be better alternatives.

Tobacco products can be fatal to pets, if ingested. Signs of poisoning develop within 15 to 45 minutes and include excitation, salivation, vomiting, and diarrhea. Pets may develop seizures, collapse and die from cardiac arrest. Keep cigarettes, cigars, tobacco, nicotine gum and patches, and ashtrays out of the reach of pets. Empty ashtrays frequently since cigarette butts contain about 25% of the total nicotine in a cigarette.

Uncooked yeast dough can expand and produce gas in the digestive system, causing pain and possible rupture of the stomach or intestines.

Grapes and raisins contain an unknown toxin, which can damage the kidneys.

The artificial sweetener, [xylitol](#), that is present in some gums, breath mints, candy, and other human food can be very toxic to dogs.

Macadamia nuts contain an unknown toxin, which can affect the digestive and nervous systems and muscles of dogs.

Remember, dogs have an exceptional sense of smell – juices on plastic or aluminum foil left on countertops are very tempting. If ingested, plastic or foil wrap (cellophane candy wrappers or food wrap) can cause choking or intestinal obstruction.

Meat-soaked strings from rump roasts are also enticing. Ingestion can cause a surgical emergency called a '[linear string foreign body](#)' in the intestines.

To be safe, put away food immediately, and pet-proof your garbage. Garbage contains all kinds of other hazards for your dog such as plastic wrap and bags, 6-pack beverage holders that could cause strangulation, fat trimmings, bones, and pieces of ribbon or tinsel.

Feed your pet(s) before a party so they will not be so apt to beg or steal food.

Poisonous Plants

We all like making our homes more festive for the holidays. We enjoy the green foliage and colorful flowers of plants. Unfortunately, many of the plants we have in our homes during the holidays can be poisonous to pets. If ingested, holly (leaves and berries) causes stomach upset and can be potentially fatal to both dogs and cats. Mistletoe upsets stomachs and can cause heart collapse, while hibiscus may cause diarrhea. Poinsettias have an irritating sap that can cause blistering in the mouth and stomach upset. So when you brighten up your home, place these plants well out of your dog's reach, or use



imitation holiday plants.

Decorations and Wrappings

All that glitters is not gold – it could be dangerous for your pet.

Ribbons, yarn, and string can cause intestinal obstruction and bunching of the intestine along the length of the string. These conditions require surgery and can be fatal. Ribbons around your dog's neck may be cute, but they can also be dangerous.

Adhesives and glues can be toxic and are often attractive to animals.

Potpourri contains oils that can be toxic to dogs if eaten. We may not think of eating it, but some curious pets may.

Candles can cause burns and fires. Never leave lighted candles unattended or within reach of your pet.

Few things are more tempting to a playful dog than a game of tug. This is not a good game, however, to play with the end of a tablecloth. Try to keep items such as tablecloths, table runners, etc., from hanging too low to the floor, and tempting happy dogs running by to grab an end and pull!

Gifts Under the Tree

Rawhide or other edible items left under the tree can be very tempting, and remember that companies (even Drs. Foster & Smith!) often package rawhide or other pet gifts wrapped in ribbon. Make sure to remove ribbons or ties before you present gifts to your dog. If played with and swallowed, yarn, ribbon, or string on gifts can cause intestinal obstruction, requiring surgery.

Perfumes and after-shaves contain ethanol (alcohol) and perfume also contains essential oils which can be very toxic to dogs if ingested.

Batteries for toys or other gifts can be toxic and cause intestinal obstruction. Keep in a safe place until they are ready to be inserted in the gift.

Christmas Trees

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, how careful we must be. Christmas trees and their decorations can create hazards for pets.

Place Christmas trees in a stable stand, and attach the tree securely to a window or wall with something like fish line. We have known others who have hung their tree from the ceiling! To keep pets away from the tree, it may help to use a Scat Mat. While most dog owners use an indoor exercise pen to provide a safe place for a pet to play, during the holidays, some people place the pen around the tree. Even though you take precautions, make sure your dog is always supervised when in a room with a tree.

Tree needles can be toxic and cause mouth and stomach irritation. Even needles and the wire of artificial trees could pose a problem. Be sure your dog is not chewing on branches or eating fallen needles.

Tinsel's shininess is attractive. When eaten, it can cause blockages, which often require surgery to remove. Leave it off the tree altogether.

Angel hair, flocking, and artificial snow are mildly toxic. If consumed in larger amounts, however, they could cause blockage of the intestine. Try decorating with something less likely to cause a problem.

Chewing on electrical cords, including cords of lights can cause problems ranging from burned mouths, to [electrical shock](#) to death by electrocution. Some larger lights can become quite hot, and could also cause burns. Unplug decorative lights when you are not there, use pet-proof extension cords, and spray cords with a product such as Bitter Apple or Chew Stop.

Dogs will often play with glass ornaments as if they were balls and serious oral lacerations can result. Sharp ornament hooks can also become imbedded in your pet's mouth or esophagus. Place ornaments that are shiny, or could be swallowed or broken high up on your tree. Larger, less intriguing ornaments can go near the bottom.

Decorating trees with food is asking for problems. Candy canes and gingerbread people can be as enticing to your dog as they are to children. We know of one diabetic dog who ran into some problems with regulating her disease because she was stealing candy canes off of the tree. Popcorn, raisin, or cranberry garlands are beautiful, but can cause an obstruction when eaten, requiring surgery.

Because tree preservatives are often sugar-based (and inviting to dogs) and because the water stands so long, the water in the tree stand often harbors potentially harmful bacteria. Fertilizers, insecticides, or flame retardants that were used on the tree may also get into the water. Cover the stand with a tree skirt or use other means to prevent access to the water.

Visitors

Some pets love visitors and behave very well. Others may be fearful or aggressive. Some [puppies may urinate when meeting](#)



[people](#). Still, others may be too full of holiday cheer and over-exuberant. Plan for how your dog will react to visitors.

A quiet room, away from the commotion with water and food available will help fearful dogs be more comfortable.

Brushing up on obedience training before the holidays may help a dog who has become a little rusty. Be sure to inform your visitors of any household 'rules' or problem behaviors concerning your pets, e.g., sneaking out the door, jumping up on the couch, getting food from the table, etc.

For dogs who may not behave or could be aggressive, placing them in a separate room, using pet gates, or having them stay at a friend's house during a party, may be necessary. Sometimes, boarding a dog in a kennel may be the safest alternative.

Cleaning products such as disinfectants get a lot of use during the holidays as we spiff up our homes for visitors. Remember, many of these products can be toxic to your pets.

When inviting visitors, make sure they know you have a pet. If these [people have allergies](#), you could help them by using a product such as Allerpet to decrease the dander in the house.

If you are traveling during the holidays, and need to leave your pet(s) at home, start to make accommodations for your pet(s) early. Many boarding facilities fill up very fast. Responsible pet sitters are a good alternative. If they are unfamiliar with your house or pet(s) have them come over and get acquainted before you leave.

New Pets

New pets are not good holiday gifts. If someone is thinking about getting a new pet, give the new prospective owner a variety of dog toys, food, or books on dog care. You may also wish to give a gift certificate so the person can choose his or her own pet after the holidays.

Similarly, if thinking about getting a new pet for yourself, remember pets need routine and a time to bond with you. With its noise, commotion, and special hazards, the holiday season is anything but routine. Think about getting your new dog after the holidays. We guarantee you will not have an after-holiday let down!

Why not make the holidays more enjoyable for homeless pets? Contact your local animal shelter to see if you can donate food, kitty litter, toys, or time.

Pet Gifts and Treats

When choosing a holiday gift for your special friend, be sure it is safe – no small pieces that could come off and be swallowed. Choose healthy holiday treats for your dog and give them in moderation.

With all of the festivities, do not forget to relax and spend some quality time with your pet. Your dog will think that is the best gift of all.

Now that you have read this article, would you like to test your knowledge of holiday hazards? If so, [click ?](#) for the quiz.



Holidays are a time to be joyful and thankful. We hope all of yours are beautiful.