

## ***Ask the Vet:* Some Foods Potentially Toxic to Pets**

**By Craig Selby, DVM – Daisy Hill Animal Hospital, Ltd.**

Taking care of pets can be a full-time job, from exercising, to protecting them against infectious diseases and parasites, to feeding them healthy and beneficial diets. Our job as caretakers also extends to constantly monitoring for safety and affording them, the best that we can, a life without health risks and dangers.

There are many items in our pet's lives that pose exceptional health risks, including toxic plants, automotive antifreeze and the accidental consumption of human medications. There also are some common food items that you may be surprised to learn that pose an exceptional health risk to our pets.

**Xylitol** is a sugar alcohol that is a common ingredient in many sugar-free products for people. This includes some chewing gums, sugar-free candy, oral rinses and toothpastes and baking additives. It also is used as a sweetener in many over-the-counter human medications. The FDA issued a warning several years ago about the potential dangers of accidental Xylitol consumption for dogs and ferrets. Ingestion of a small amount can cause acute life-threatening low blood sugar and large ingestions can lead to acute liver disease and liver failure.

**Chocolate** probably is the most widely known dog toxin, though cats also can be affected. The toxicity is due to a methylxanthine (like caffeine), and can lead to vomiting, diarrhea, hyperactivity, pancreatitis, heart arrhythmias and seizures. Death is rare but possible.

Exposure is more common with the overabundance of chocolate products around the holidays, but consumption can happen anytime chocolate products are left unattended. Other sources of chocolate include baked goods, chewable multi-vitamins or even chocolate-covered espresso beans. The darker the chocolate, the higher the risk of toxicity. Watch out for the chocolate wrappers too, as ingestion of them could cause GI tract obstruction or vomiting.

**Grape and raisin** ingestion has been associated with acute kidney failure in dogs. Anecdotal evidence suggests cats may be similarly affected. Not every dog or cat seems susceptible, as some can eat large quantities without consequence. This suggests there may be a genetic or other risk factor to developing illness.

While the exact cause of toxicity is unknown, pesticides and fungal growth on grapes do not seem likely. Clinical signs can develop rapidly within several hours. Symptoms include anorexia, vomiting, diarrhea and lethargy. Severe acute renal failure can also occur. For affected dogs, even early aggressive therapy may not result in better than a guarded prognosis.

**Onions, garlic, chives and leeks** all are related and can be poisonous to dogs and cats. Garlic is about five times as potent as onions. Ingestion can result in oxidative damage to red blood cells, making the cells more likely to break down or rupture. Anemia may develop but usually with a delayed onset, so signs of illness may not be apparent for several days. Gastrointestinal signs also may develop, including nausea, drooling, abdominal discomfort and mouth irritation. Be careful if you use a soup broth (or even some baby foods) to supplement your pet's food -- many contain dehydrated onions or even onion juice as a flavor enhancer.

**Fatty and fried foods**, while tasty, have a long-standing reputation for causing GI problems such as pancreatitis, vomiting and subsequent diarrhea. Clinically, pets can develop abdominal pain, have significant lethargy, can become dehydrated and quickly require therapy. Pets are prone to get into unsecured garbage cans, so plan smartly if disposing of fatty food products.

Dogs that are more at risk of significant illness include those that are overweight, have diabetes or other endocrine diseases, and those with a prior history of GI tract disease. In fact, subsequent recurrences of pancreatitis from any cause often are worse and more challenging to resolve.

**Macadamia nut** toxicity generally is milder than the others described here, but still can cause a variety of clinical signs. Toxicity has been seen only in dogs. Signs include severe lethargy, increased body temperature, vomiting, tremors and the inability to walk. The toxic mechanism is undetermined, but nerve function seems to be affected.

**Avocados**, while being touted as highly healthy for people, can be deadly to birds and large animals like cattle. The avocado contains persin, which in birds can cause respiratory distress, major organ failure and death. Dogs and cats seem mostly unaffected by persin, but the large seed puts some dogs at risk for intestinal obstruction if eaten.

Contact your veterinary team or a veterinary emergency service if your pet has had known exposure to a potential toxin. They can help determine the level of exposure and needs for supportive therapy. Pay close attention to the food items, ingredients and trash to which your pet has access. Knowing what exposures were likely helps reduce diagnostic time and secure accurate treatment that may be lifesaving.