

(At the conclusion of this month's column I will offer some words on how you can help the animals that have been affected by Hurricane Katrina.)

Some years ago the veterinary world learned of yet another way dogs can get sick-eating grapes or raisins. In 1999 the Animal Poison Control Center at the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) noticed a cluster of dogs that were becoming ill after eating grapes or raisins. Since then they have received over 240 calls about cases suspected to be grape or raisin toxicity. In a study to be published this fall in the Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine, 43 of these cases are looked at in detail in an effort to better understand the problem.

While the toxic chemical or agent in grapes that makes some dogs sick remains illusive, one thing is very clear-damage to the kidney system is the final result. Sadly, 47% of the dogs in the study died from advanced kidney failure after grape/raisin ingestion. Let's answer some common questions about this problem, but don't hold your breath, in many cases definitive answers are in short supply.

My dog eats grapes all the time and never gets sick, how can they be toxic?

This is one of the challenging issues about this problem. Some dogs seem sensitive to grape/raisin toxicity while others appear resistant. Currently there is no known breed, gender, or age risks for grape/raisin toxicity. Because a relatively few cases have been looked at, it may be that those patterns are just not evident yet. One thing is clear, not every dog that eats grapes/raisins gets sick.

How many grapes are considered toxic?

The study reported that in some cases the harmful amount of grapes can be relatively small. 10-15 grapes caused problems in some small dogs. More specifically the study reported that amounts as low as 0.3oz per pound of body weight of grapes and 0.05oz per pound of body weight of raisins made some dogs sick.

What is it about some grapes/raisins that make them toxic to dogs?

This is not yet known. Some theorize that problem may have something to do with a particular chemical or agent on or in the grapes, but various investigations have failed to identify the smoking gun. In addition, I was unable to find any reference to one particular type of grape being more concerning than another.

Are other species of animals at risk for grape/raisin toxicity?

The available data on grape toxicity in non-canine species is very limited. The Animal Poison Control Center has consulted on a few cat and ferret cases, but the information is too scant to conclude whether or not these species are truly at risk.

What are the symptoms of grape/raisin toxicity in dogs?

If dogs are sensitive to grapes and they ingest a toxic amount, the first symptoms are usually vomiting and diarrhea. These symptoms will usually develop within 24-48 hours of ingestion and there may be grape/raisin residue in the vomitus and/or stool. Subsequently, affected dogs will become listless and lose their appetite.

What do I do if my dog eats some grapes?

This is a good question because as I mentioned earlier, not all dogs that eat grapes get sick. First you should contact your veterinarian or emergency service as soon as possible for advice. If it's been 48 hours since the grapes were ingested and your dog is not showing any of the symptoms mentioned above you are probably safe. The dilemma arises when it's only been a few hours since ingestion-maybe too soon for symptoms to develop. In these cases The Animal Poison Control Center recommends a cautious approach, and assume the pet will be sensitive to the grapes. After all, when your pet's well being is at stake, it's better to be safe than sorry. Your veterinarian can often remove some or all of the grapes by inducing vomiting. In addition, certain binding agents can be given to limit intestinal absorption of possible toxic chemicals. Intravenous fluids can provide additional support of the kidney system. If no problems are noted within 48 hours then the patient is probably out of danger.

Can the kidney failure be treated?

Early intervention is critical. Affected dogs usually need to be hospitalized for aggressive intravenous fluid treatment and monitoring of their kidney function. In some severely affected dogs, referral to a university hospital for dialysis may be their only hope for survival.

Considering the potential for dangerous toxicity, it might be a good idea to take grapes/raisins off your dog's "treat menu". Like with chocolate ingestion in dogs, a relative small amount does not appear dangerous but in some cases the risk increases with increasing doses. Come to think of it, this may be a call to action for all dog owners to consider sticking with pet food for their pets and rethinking the wisdom of sharing human snacks with them.

Katrina disaster relief for animals

While the scope of human loss and suffering seems unimaginable, we can't forget that there were many animals impacted by the Katrina disaster as well. I've listed below just a sampling of organizations that need financial assistance in their effort to help these lost and injured animals. Keep in mind that Red Cross do not allow animals into their shelters. So those animals that have survived, and somehow were not separated from their families, will need sheltering and care while their human families remain in the shelter. And then there are the pets that are separated from their families; who will care for them? Please help in any way you can. Whether it's a donation for human aid or animal aid, large or small, in a disaster of this magnitude every contribution counts.

America Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA)

Phone: (866) 275-3923

Web site: www.aspca.org

Mississippi Veterinary Medical Association

Website: www.msvet.org

Make donation checks payable to the “Mississippi Animal Disaster Relief Fund” (write “Katrina Fund” on the check memo line) and mail to MS Animal disaster Relief Fund, 209 South Lafayette, Starkville MS 39759

Louisiana State University School of Veterinary Medicine

Phone: (888) 773-6489

Website: www.vetmed.lsu.edu

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