

Holidays and pets

This is a scary time of year. The crowded malls, the frenzied shoppers, the crazy drivers, they all contribute to a risky few weeks. And if that's not enough to rattle you, the rich food and drink will usually finish the job. And now the bad news: your pet is at risk as well.

As we prepare for these days ahead, the family pet must not be overlooked. Many potential risks await the family pet during these hectic days of preparation, anticipation and inevitable stress. Hopefully, with a little planning, you can assure your pet will enjoy a safe and healthy holiday season-even if you don't. After all, the stress and expense of a late night trip to the pet emergency clinic is probably the last thing you need in the weeks ahead.

Interestingly, most of the health risks our pets face during the holiday season center on what they eat. In many households the family dog(s) often shares in the tasty, rich, high fat foods we all enjoy during the holidays. Unfortunately, this can be quite dangerous. When some dogs are fed, or accidentally get into, a large amount of food that is much richer than their regular food, they can develop a serious problem called pancreatitis. This painful disease can be life threatening. While there are many different causes of pancreatitis in the dog, a rich or high fat meal is a common culprit. Therefore it is very important that we resist the temptation to "reserve a place at the table" for Fido this holiday season. His dog food is far better for him, and in the long run he will be healthier for it. This is not to say that cats are free to eat what they want. While the connection between high fat foods and pancreatitis in cats is not as clear, it is generally unwise to offer such foods to them as well. In both dogs and cats, feeding people food of any kind adds to the ongoing challenge of weight control. In our practice, obesity is the most common nutritional problem we see. Obesity in turn increases animals' risks for many serious health problems. We'll talk about overweight pets in more detail in a future column.

Many people are already aware that chocolate can be toxic to dogs, with all the chocolate around during the holidays, it's well worth mentioning here. The caffeine-like ingredients in chocolate are slow to clear from the dog's system, and therefore can potentially reach toxic levels in the blood. Keep in mind that the amount and type of chocolate your dog eats is critical in determining if he or she will get sick. Small amounts of milk chocolate are rarely a problem. Most problems develop when a small dog eats a large amount of dark chocolate or worse yet, baking chocolate. Common symptoms of chocolate toxicity are hyperactivity, vomiting, diarrhea, muscle twitching, convulsions or even death. These symptoms usually appear within a few hours of eating the chocolate. If you are concerned your dog may have eaten a large amount of chocolate, call your veterinarian immediately.

Dogs, cats and birds, like people, take special interest in all the shiny, glittering ornaments and decorations around the house during the holidays. Objects such as tree ornaments (as well the small metal hooks used to hang them), tinsel, small electric light bulbs, and ribbons have a curious way of finding their way into the intestinal tracts of our pets. This, of course, can have serious if not tragic consequences. If possible, plan your holiday decorating so as to limit your pet's access to these objects.

With all the anticipation, planning and excitement of the holiday season sometimes the family pet is not checked on or looked at as much as usual. Be sure your pet continues to have its normal patterns of eating, drinking, activity, and elimination. If there is wet or cold weather, and your pet is not allowed inside the house, be sure to provide a dry, warm, wind sheltered place for him or her to get out of the elements. Be aware that at times, even in the temperate Bay Area, temperatures can drop quite low. Most importantly, during the holidays, try to spend a little extra time with your pet; it will undoubtedly be good for the both of you.

On a final note, let's address the issue of giving pets as gifts. On the surface, this idea seems like a fun and special gift for a friend or family member, but in reality can lead to some difficult problems. Keep in mind that when someone acquires a new pet, either as a gift or otherwise, it is often a 12-15 year commitment for that new pet owner. The following questions need to be asked of the new pet owner before they are surprised with a new pet: Does the new pet owner have the appropriate space to house a pet? Will the owner be able to afford the inevitable costs of having a pet? It's not unusual for the typical American to spend hundreds of dollars a year for veterinary care alone on a single pet. This does not even address costs for food, grooming, toys, boarding and the like. Does the prospective new pet owner have the time in their life to care for a pet? We all know how pets can be a wonderful addition to our lives, but for the animal's sake, always check with the new owner and involve them in any new pet decisions. Pets, in general, are not good items for surprise gifts.

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