

Protecting Your Pets from Holiday Hazards

Between preparations for decking the halls and singing festive carols, have you given any thought as to how your holiday celebrations affect the animals in your life? Whether you've got budgies, kittens, or a Labrador retriever, your animal companion may require some special attention during the holiday season. Read on for some practical advice on how to avoid unnecessary trips to the veterinarian this season.

Keep dangerous decorations out of harm's way

We all love a sparkling tree and adorned mantel, but how we dress up our homes may pose health hazards to our pets. A whole host of potentially dangerous substances could be hidden in your special holiday decorations.

For instance, many traditional holiday plants pose health risks for animals: poinsettias have an irritating sap that can cause mouth and stomach blistering; mistletoe can cause heart collapse and upset stomach; hibiscus can lead to diarrhea; and holly leaves and berries are known to be potentially fatal to dogs and cats.

Decorating without these plants or keeping

them out of reach are two good ways to avoid plant poisonings.

Christmas trees are an entirely unique hazard. Cats and other small animals love to climb them, but if unstable, these present serious injury possibilities. So be sure your tree stand is solid and consider tethering it to the wall or ceiling for added security. The water in your tree stand may be poisonous, especially if the pine sap mixes with water or if you add a preservative or aspirin to prolong the life of the tree. So keep the water covered to prevent animals from drinking from it.

Small and often breakable ornaments and toys are irresistible to cats and other animals. Avoid losing precious keepsakes and prevent animal injuries by either hanging ornaments (securely) near the top of your tree or forgoing an indoor Christmas tree altogether, and likewise be mindful of small or breakable toys and gifts after the wrapping is removed.

Tinsel

(some varieties of which

can contain toxic lead) and thin ribbons are choking and intestinal hazards to many animals as well.

Also protect your animals from electrocution by making it impossible for them to chew on dangerous electrical cords: use outlets that are high up, tack cords out of reach, and wrap connections in electrical wire. And be sure to switch lights off while you're not at home to avoid the risk of fire.

Be mindful of mesmerizing flames, too, whether you're using scented candles, tapers in a menorah, or enjoying a warm fire. Candles should be kept out of reach of all animals (especially birds and cats) and fireplaces should have a barrier to keep pets from exploring the flames.

Steer clear of edibles like potpourri and candy canes. Although these aren't likely to poison an animal, they can induce vomiting, and no one likes to clean up pet messes during the holidays. And finally, forgo the use of angel hair (which is spun glass) and cotton batting as these can both cause intestinal blockages in animals if ingested in large quantities.

Make gift-giving pet-friendly, too

What you put beneath your tree is almost as important as how you decorate it since many gifts—for both pets and peoples—come with potential health hazards. Wrapped people food items, when eaten in excess, can induce vomiting. Other “edible” hazards include perfumes and aftershaves which often





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contain ethanol and essential oils that are toxic to many animals; batteries that contain poisonous heavy metals; and items made with adhesives and glues that may contain hazardous ingredients.

Even toys that you buy specifically for your animal companion can be dangerous. Just like toys for children, many pet toys contain high concentrations of lead. To protect your pet from exposure to lead, avoid those pet toys made from vinyl (PVC) or soft plastics and look for a "Made in the USA" label to ensure it's not sourced from countries with more lax laws for the use of lead. And when using ribbons and bows (even those used to wrap a gift for your animal!), be sure that they're thick and attached securely to the packages, and put them away shortly following gift-opening time, too.

Be mindful of pets in the kitchen

The holidays are full of food, but here, too, your pet may be at risk. Keep festive alcohol beverages, morsels of chocolate (contains theobromine, which is toxic to dogs and cats), as well as tea and coffee (which, along with chocolate, contain another toxin to animals: xanthine) away from your animals to prevent poisonings.

Avoid giving your pets meat scraps from the table. Ham can cause stomach upset in cats because of its high fat content, and poultry bones can choke most animals. Foil, plastic, and string used to prepare meats and other foods all pose choking and digestive obstruction hazards as well.

Avoid activity stress

If you plan to have crowds of people over for the holidays, begin to prepare now to make the festivities as stress-free for your animal companions as possible. New people and bustling activity can raise anxiety levels in animals which can leave them vulnerable

to health problems as well as increase the chances of misbehavior.

Prepare ahead of time for busy activities. Most importantly, ensure your pets are wearing collars with their proper ID tags in case they escape during the hubbub. Those with dogs in the home should attempt to work on greeting manners before festivities begin so to avoid jumping, licking, and chewing inappropriately. And as guests arrive, educate them on rules for how to treat your pets, including how to discourage bad behavior and whether treats are allowed.

For high-strung animals, avoidance is sometimes the best medicine. When hosting people in your home, you may choose to give your pet extra playtime to satisfy their need for activity prior to the arrival of guests. Then, just before the doorbell rings, put your pet in a quiet room, being sure to leave them with plenty of water, food, bedding, and activities or treats to keep them occupied.

Calming treats in particular can be helpful in keeping your pet on an even keel. For dogs, use Beefeater's Calming Sticks or Ultra Calm Treats, and for cats consider PetNaturals Calming Soft Chews or Bach Flower Rescue Remedy (drops or spray).

Say "no" to gifting animals

As exciting as it would be to gift someone with a new little animal, the ASPCA recommends that pets never be given as gifts. A pet owner should choose on their own to bring a pet into their home. Unexpected animals in a home may be neglected or worse yet, be returned to the pet store or humane society if not wanted. If you really desire to give a pet as a gift, fashion a gift certificate so that your giftee will have something to open, and then discuss the possibility of pet ownership with them before taking them to your local humane society to choose an appropriate companion animal. ☺