

The Holidays just wouldn't be The Holidays without all those wonderful chocolate treats and candies. Some flatly admit they are "chocoholics", while others justify their indulgence by citing medical studies that claim various health benefits from eating these rich delights (personally I like the latter excuse). No matter what the reason, most of us over-indulge in chocolate during this time of year. Unfortunately, with all this chocolate around the house, it's not unusual for our canine family members to partake as well.

Most dog owners have at least heard about the potential dangers of chocolate in dogs, but like so many things in medicine it's not quite as simple as it sounds. Let's talk this month about why, in some situations, chocolate can be a very dangerous toxin for dogs, while in other situations we probably have little to worry about.

Chocolate contains at least two ingredients that can make your dog sick-fat and a chemical called theobromine. Most people are aware of the high fat content of chocolate candies and treats. In fact one could argue that chocolate indulgence is largely responsible for those extra pounds that mysteriously appear on the bathroom scale at the end of each Holiday season. Like in people, weight gain from high fat foods and treats is a problem for dogs, but other more immediate problems can develop as well. These can range from a mild "stomach ache" to life threatening pancreatitis (a sometimes severe inflammation of the delicate pancreas organ).

While the fat in chocolate can be a real canine health concern, it's the theobromine that makes chocolate so famously "toxic" to dogs. Theobromine is a caffeine-like chemical that is metabolized rather slowly by the canine system. This means that all that theobromine from a chocolate binge remains in the canine system a long time. If enough chocolate is ingested, serious problems can develop. Interestingly, some years ago a report from the National Animal Poison Control Center (NAPCC) cited no cases of theobromine toxicity in cats. This, they suggested was likely due to different eating habits of felines. They did report theobromine related deaths in horses from eating cocoa bean hulls used for stall bedding, and in livestock when cocoa waste products were used in their feed.

We frequently field phone calls from worried dog owners about chocolate toxicity. Fortunately, in most of these cases, dogs don't eat enough chocolate to warrant much worry. Three factors determine if a dog is likely to get sick from chocolate ingestion: (1) the type of chocolate eaten (milk, dark, baking, etc), (2) the amount of chocolate eaten, and (3) the body weight of the dog. Different types of chocolate vary dramatically in how much theobromine they contain. Unsweetened baking chocolate for instance contains nearly ten times the amount of theobromine than milk chocolate. Therefore a dog needs to eat a lot of milk chocolate to get sick, but a relatively small amount of ingested baking chocolate can cause serious problems. Let's look at a real life example: A 20-pound dog would need to eat twelve or more regular sized (2 ounce) milk chocolate Hershey bars to get a dangerous amount of theobromine. On the other hand, that same 20-pound dog could get dangerously ill from eating just 2-3 ounces (about ¼ of a box) of baking chocolate. It stands to reason then that the dog that "accidentally" gets few small pieces of milk chocolate candy during the neighborhood holiday party is not likely to have any problem. But don't leave any unattended baking chocolate lying around the kitchen or you might find yourself making an unexpected trip to the pet E.R.

If a dog does manage to eat a "toxic" amount of chocolate problems will usually develop within a few hours. Initially vomiting and diarrhea will alert the pet owner that something is wrong, but these symptoms may progress rapidly to hyperactivity, nervousness, muscle twitching, unstable gait, seizures, coma and even death in severe cases. If you find that your dog has eaten more than a small amount of chocolate, a call to your veterinarian would be in order. Your pet's doctor will want to know your pet's weight and approximately how much and what kind of chocolate was ingested. This will help him/her determine if any action is needed.

Treatment of chocolate toxicity requires aggressive veterinary intervention and focuses on reducing any further absorption of chocolate from the gut, while enhancing theobromine excretion by administering IV fluids. Sometimes medications are needed to control cardiovascular problems and seizures while the dog's system slowly detoxifies the theobromine.

Hopefully during the next few weeks you and your family can share in all the traditional epicurean delights of the Holiday season. Undoubtedly, for many this will include plenty of chocolate. Just don't share any with Fido.

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