I really didn't expect it; after all, we haven't seen any recently so I smugly thought I had things well under control. But sure enough, there they were. A line on ants running from the back door all the way to the kitchen. Under the kitchen table it broke into two lines, one heading toward the pantry and the other toward the sink. The problem was solved, at least for the short term, with a few quick squirts of ant spray. But the strong smell of the ant spray reminded me of its potential toxicity.

Whether it be insects, spiders, snails, rodents, or weeds there's always some product on the market that claims to eliminate the problem, but sometimes at a high price. All to often our pets are the unintended targets of these chemicals.

Summertime seems to be a genuinely risky season for pets. With long warm days there's plenty of daylight to get injured or sick, get a foxtail in the ear, and even pick up a few fleas or ticks on the way back home. Summertime also brings the increased use of household pesticides and chemicals around the home, and increased risk of inadvertent pet poisoning. Let's talk about some of the common problems we see with poisoning in pets and how to prevent them.

Dogs and cats, as well as birds, reptiles and "pocket pets" come in contact with toxins through many routes. Ingestion of chemicals is one of the most common ways or pets can become poisoned, but inhalation and skin contact are additional routes for poisons to enter the body.

If a pet swallows a poison we want to do what we can to get some or all of it back out. Most veterinarians agree that if it's been less than 1-2 hours since an animal has ingested a toxic substance, a fair amount will still be in the stomach where it can still be removed. After two hours much of the poison will likely have passed into the small intestine where it will start to be absorbed into the blood. During that critical first 2 hours your veterinarian may use medications to induce vomiting in your pet to help remove at least some of the toxin from the stomach. Less commonly, stomach lavage or "pumping the stomach" may be needed.

If more than two hours have passed since the toxin was ingested, we will often have the pet swallow a liquid charcoal containing product that helps to bind up some of the poison in the intestines so it will pass out with the stool and not be absorbed. In these cases we have to assume that at least some of the poison will be absorbed into the bloodstream and may cause some problems.

We will often need to support these animals in the hospital with intravenous fluids to help their liver and other major organs "ride out" the insult. The liver and kidney systems will likely be the organs that do most of the detoxification, and the IV fluids will greatly help in the process. Certain types of poisonings have antidotes (drugs that directly counter the effect of the poison) while others don't. Sometimes all we can do is use medications to control the symptoms caused by the toxin and keep the patient comfortable while the animal's system is slowly detoxified. If all this sounds like a lot of work, then I think I'm making my point. Lets talk about some specific types of poisons and some of the problems they can cause.

Insecticides are used extensively in many homes, and in most cases they're used safely. Occasionally pets will ingest material recently spray or treated with products intended for ants, spiders or other bugs. Pets also can be accidentally poisoned with certain flea control products. This has been a much less common form of poisoning since the introduction of Advantage and Frontline for flea control. Most insecticides, if ingested in toxic amounts, will cause symptoms such as muscle tremors, excess salivation, vomiting, diarrhea, mental depression, hyper-excitability, and some cases seizures. These symptoms can develop in minutes to hours after ingestion depending on the type of toxin, how much was ingested, and how much the pet weighs. As you might guess, it only takes a small amount of insectacide to spell real trouble for our smallest pets. The best prevention for this type of poisoning is to read and follow label instructions carefully, and keep your pets well away from the treated areas.

Snail and slug bait is another common household pesticide, especially popular in the spring and summer gardening season. Most of these products contain Metaldehyde, a potent neuromuscular toxin. Once ingested this toxin will often cause uncontrollable muscle tremors that can progress to seizure and death if not addressed immediately. Dogs and sometimes cats seem attracted to the taste of these products. Prevent problems by using alternative, less toxic products (talk to your local nursery for ideas, I've used some of the alternative snail and slug products with good success), and again, limit any access your pets may have to the Metaldehyde treated area.

Rodenticides are used in many households to help control mice and rats. The most common type of rodent killing product is made from coumarin-like compounds (e.g., D-con). These chemicals cause excessive and uncontrolled bleeding in the rodent as well as any other animal that may ingest them.

The most challenging aspect about rodenticide toxicity is that the symptoms of poisoning (bleeding) may not be evident until 3-5 days after ingestion. I've seen cases where owners have actually known their pet has eaten some rat bait. They logically figured their pet was going to be fine because they didn't see any immediate problems that first day or two, only to find them very sick 3-4 days later.

Rodenticide poisoning is relatively easy to control if treatment is started soon after ingestion. But if we wait to see symptoms of bleeding, heroic measures may be needed to save those patients. There are blood tests that can determine if these types of rodent baits have poisoned your pet. If you even suspect your pet has ingested some rodenticide see your veterinarian immediately. Remember early treatment is very effective and usually life saving. If you choose to use these potent products, be very careful to place them in an inaccessible location where your pet cannot reach them.

There are many other things that can cause poisoning in our pets. Various plants, cleaning agents, drugs of all kinds, fertilizers, herbicides, and automobile products are just a few examples. Considering the potential for severe illness and even death from such poisonings (this would include children as well as pets), we all need to keep our family's safety in mind and choose and utilize these products wisely.

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