

8 tips to keep your pet safe from winter and holiday hazards

With the holidays approaching, here's what to avoid to keep your pet safe and healthy

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Figure 1 Some pets love the winter weather, but it's still important to monitor them for frostbite and hypothermia (tips below). This is Niko, a yellow lab, posing on Mount Hood in Oregon. (Photo © Eva Marsh)

During the holidays, it's common to have foods and decorations in your home that you don't typically have during the rest of the year. Some may be very attractive to your pet but could create health problems if consumed. The cold weather also presents conditions that could be hazardous to your pet's health. It's helpful to be aware of these issues to avoid dangerous situations for your pets.

1. Dispose of antifreeze properly, and do not let your pet ingest it.

Antifreeze typically contains ethylene glycol, a product that can cause lethal kidney failure and metabolic acidosis (accumulation of acid in the blood and body tissues) if ingested. It has a sweet taste that attracts animals and can be toxic in small doses; for example, just 1 to 2 tablespoons can produce toxicity in a medium-sized dog. Antifreeze can be toxic even when diluted in water.

Some brands of antifreeze use propylene glycol for the active component as an alternative to ethylene glycol. Compared to ethylene glycol-based antifreeze, larger quantities of the propylene glycol-based antifreeze usually have to be swallowed to produce toxicity. Additionally, propylene glycol-based antifreeze does not metabolize in the animal's system to form products that cause kidney damage. However, it can still cause illness and death via metabolic acidosis.

An antidote is available for antifreeze poisoning, but early recognition and immediate intensive medical treatment are imperative for the survival of the animal. The best medicine, though, is to prevent animals from being in contact with this toxic substance by having antifreeze changed by a professional who knows how to properly dispose of it. If individuals change their own antifreeze, they should not drain it into the sewer or leave it setting out in a pan for any amount of time (all it takes is a few seconds for an animal to ingest it).

Some snow globes may contain this product as well, so keep them out of reach from your pets.

2. Chocolate is a tasty treat that could turn toxic.

Baker's or baking chocolate is the form of chocolate that contains a higher concentration of stimulant (theobromine) than either semi-sweet or regular milk chocolate. The extent of toxicity an animal exhibits after consuming chocolate is based on a variety of factors, such as the type of chocolate ingested, the size of the animal, or an animal's individual sensitivity to chocolate. Dogs in particular are attracted to sweet treats. Some typical clinical signs of chocolate toxicity include excessive excitability, restlessness, increased heart rate, muscle tremors, vomiting and diarrhea. The last two clinical signs may be transiently present due to an animal consuming any amount of chocolate (i.e., any ingestion of chocolate may cause gastrointestinal upset, but not extensive toxicity).



Figure 2 Pets like Zane enjoy holiday festivities like opening presents, but make sure they only have access to pet-friendly toys and treats. (Photo by Pamela Wilson)

The literature gives a wide range of toxic levels, so a veterinarian should be consulted immediately to discuss the appropriate action to be taken if an animal has consumed chocolate. There is no specific antidote for chocolate toxicity. Animals can be treated by a veterinarian to address any clinical signs they are exhibiting; vomiting may be induced within 2 hours of the chocolate consumption depending on the amount ingested and other factors.

3. Your pet is sweet enough, so no xylitol sweets for the sweet.

Another dangerous substance associated with sweet treats is xylitol. Xylitol is an artificial sweetener found in sugar-free products, such as gum, candy, baked goods and some dental products (which provides another reason for only using pet, not human, toothpaste when you brush your pet's teeth). Even a small dose of xylitol can cause toxic effects; it can also be fatal. If a pet consumes xylitol, it can cause hypoglycemia (sudden decrease in blood glucose) or liver failure.

If you suspect that your pet has eaten a product with xylitol, you should take it to a veterinarian immediately, as signs of toxicity can start within 30 minutes of ingestion (signs could also be delayed for a few days). Some of the clinical signs of xylitol toxicity in dogs include weakness, lethargy, vomiting, diarrhea, muscle tremors, seizures, anemia, increased thirst, increased urination, and bloody or tarry feces. There have been some indications that ferrets may react to xylitol in the same way that dogs do.

Cats may also exhibit some of these clinical signs if they ingest xylitol; however, xylitol poisoning in cats appears to be rare, possibly because they may metabolize it differently or because they typically are not interested in eating food products that contain this sweetener, whereas dogs find these type of products very attractive to consume.

4. Certain holiday “greens” are not healthy options.

The berry of mistletoe is the most toxic component of this plant, especially if it is chewed instead of swallowed whole. If the berry is ingested in sufficient quantity, it can cause gastrointestinal and neurological signs, including convulsions.

The red berries on the holly plant, if consumed in large amounts, may cause gastrointestinal signs such as vomiting and diarrhea. These clinical signs can lead to dehydration, which may need to be treated with injectable fluids.

Whether the poinsettia plant is toxic has been debated for years. The most recent findings are that it contains no toxic chemical. However, as with any plant that an animal is not accustomed to eating, it can cause diarrhea and vomiting (a protective mechanism to eliminate the foreign substance). Animals tend to be attracted to poinsettias, so it is a good practice to keep these plants out of their reach.

Ivy is not acutely toxic, but it can cause gastrointestinal upset if ingested.

Similarly, the Christmas cactus is nontoxic, but it can cause vomiting and transient diarrhea if consumed.

5. Your pet already shines, so no additional bling is needed.



Figure 3 Banff prefers to be warm and protected lying on a blanket that looks like snow instead of a blanket of real snow. (Photo by Pamela Wilson)

Glow jewelry is a popular item to wear at a variety of festivities; however, be aware that it **contains dibutyl phthalate**. Although this chemical may have the potential to cause death via respiratory paralysis, pets generally will only ingest a minimal amount due to its unpleasant taste and the fact that only a small amount of the chemical is present in the jewelry. Cats or dogs that have bitten into the jewelry may exhibit heavy salivation, gagging, hyperactivity and aggressive behavior, but they typically recover within minutes.

Immediately after a pet ingests this chemical, it helps to give it small quantities of water, milk, tuna juice (useful to encourage cats in particular to drink) or canned food to dilute the chemical in its mouth. Wash off any drops of the chemical that might be on the pet's coat, and flush its eyes with water if there has been ocular exposure. There is no known antidote for dibutyl phthalate; pets that have ingested large quantities should be closely monitored and given supportive treatment by a veterinarian as warranted

6. Pet-proof your tree by eliminating tinsel, using shatterproof ornaments, and tending to the water.

Another festive holiday trim that can cause complications for your pet is Christmas tree tinsel, and cats especially are attracted to playing with it. If ingested, it can cause an intestinal blockage or intussusception (prolapsing of one part of the intestine into the cavity of an immediately adjoining part). If cats are present, avoid using strands of tinsel. It would also be advisable to place breakable ornaments at the top of the tree, and consider investing in shatterproof ornaments. Keep electrical cords for lights out of reach of pets because they may like to play with them or chew them, which could lead to them being shocked or even starting an electrical fire. Additionally, don't put edible ornaments, such as candy canes, on the tree where your dog can reach them and be tempted to eat them, which could lead to gastrointestinal upset.

Many years ago, my dad sought to create a quaint, old-fashioned look by hanging candy canes without their plastic wrappers on the tree. Our family dog, Frisky (an extremely intelligent Australian Shepherd mix with a beautiful brown and black coat), agreed that this was, indeed, a splendid idea; while we were gone, he ate all the peppermint treats that were within his reach on the lower branches. Fortunately, he handled this unusual addition to his diet with no obvious digestive complications. That wouldn't necessarily be the case for every pet (again, ingestion of a substance that an animal is not accustomed to eating can lead to various clinical signs, including diarrhea and vomiting).



Figure 4 Niko “Yellow Dog” dressed to impress for the holidays. (Photo © Eva Marsh)

As a side note, another family legend includes Frisky heartily surviving his raid on an Easter basket filled with chocolate eggs and jelly beans that my brother had stealthily hidden under his bed for safekeeping from his siblings.

Having a live Christmas tree can add a whole different dimension of green to your holiday décor. To keep the tree fresher longer and prevent it from getting too dry (which can create a fire hazard), keep the base of the tree in fresh water. However, you should avoid additives such as sugar, aspirin and alcohol. Many tree experts say these additives are not needed to keep the tree fresh. Since your pet may drink the water in the tree stand, that’s even more reason to not add anything that could be harmful if ingested. Sugar could increase the potential for bacterial growth in the water. Aspirin can be toxic particularly to cats and cause clinical signs ranging from vomiting and diarrhea to gastric ulcers and kidney failure. Alcohol can not only cause your pet to become drowsy and lose coordination, ingestion of high levels (which could be a small amount for a small pet) can depress the nervous system, slow the heart rate, and modify the blood chemistry, possibly leading to metabolic acidosis (as described under tip #1 pertaining to ingestion of antifreeze).

7. Help your pet weather the cold.

The [US Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service’s Animal Welfare Act](#) recommends that ambient temperature should not drop below 50 degrees Fahrenheit, especially when sick, aged or young animals are present. If it does, plan to use auxiliary heating and additional bedding. Additionally, animals should always be provided with adequate protection and shelter from wind, rain and snow. Owners in states that rarely get cold should keep in mind that their animals are not acclimated to cold weather, so they must protect them from extreme weather conditions accordingly. Older animals, very young animals, animals with low body fat, and breeds with thinner coats may be more susceptible to the effects of the cold; pet clothes and boots may offer some protection for these animals and those unaccustomed to cold weather.

If an animal is exposed to cold temperatures for too long, it can develop frostbite or hypothermia just like a person can. Extremities, such as the ear tips, tail, feet and scrotum, are particularly susceptible to frostbite. A common indicator of frostbite is the skin becoming pale and possibly developing a bluish hue, which may not be readily noticeable on an animal due to its coat. Although you should take your pet to a veterinarian as soon as possible to determine the extent of the condition, you can provide some immediate care by applying a warm towel or lukewarm water to the affected area (do not rub this area, which is tempting to do, as that could cause tissue damage).

Clinical signs of hypothermia may begin with shivering and lethargy and can progress to muscle stiffness, reduced heart rate and breathing, and even coma. Being in cold temperatures with a wet coat and skin can increase the animal's chances for developing hypothermia. Similar to frostbite, you can give immediate care by wrapping your pet in a warm towel, blanket or your coat or placing it in a lukewarm bath (if your pet is still alert). You can use rewarming sources (for example, hot water bottles and heating pads), but do not place them directly against the animal's skin; have a buffer, such as a towel or blanket, between the animal and the rewarming source. Also as with frostbite, you should take your pet to a veterinarian as soon as possible.

8. Be prepared if your pet ingests something potentially toxic.

If you suspect that an animal has ingested something potentially toxic, immediately consult a veterinarian, animal emergency clinic or poison control center. In the US, the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center can be reached at 1-800-548-2423.

You can also be proactively prepared for any pet medical emergency by being aware of your veterinarian's office hours and policies on handling after-hour emergencies. Also become familiar with the location and office hours of the nearest animal emergency clinic, and keep its phone number on hand. These steps will help to save you time and reduce stress during a medical emergency.

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- [What's the best way to keep your Christmas tree fresh?](#) (LiveScience)
- [5 steps to a fresher Christmas Tree](#) (About.com)