

Danger Lurks in Your Kitchen

By Jane Barber

We Americans spend over \$10 billion dollars a year on food for our pets. Despite having the best food available, many pets would rather eat what we eat and will go to great lengths to counter surf and raid the trash to get forbidden foods. Not to mention that most of us must plead “GUILTY” to occasionally feeding our pets our food. The problem is that certain foods that we enjoy can be dangerous for our pets. Some food is toxic due to ingredients and some by improper cooking, storage or sanitation. The following is a list of items commonly found in our kitchens that if ingested by your pet, could result in a hospital stay or even death.

Alcoholic Beverages. Ethanol is the component in alcoholic beverages that can be toxic when an excessive amount is ingested. Pets are much smaller than us and can be adversely affected by small amounts of alcohol. Exercise caution when drinks and pets are together. A single drink left on a coffee table can be enough to cause problems. Toxicity can cause a wide variety of signs and symptoms may result in death. Signs may include odor of alcohol on the animal’s breath, staggering, behavioral changes, excitement, depression, increased urination, slowed breathing, cardiac arrest or death.

Apples, Apricots, Cherries, Peaches and Plums. Ingestion of large amounts of stems, seeds and leaves of these fruits can be toxic. They contain a cyanide-like compound. Signs of toxicity include apprehension, dilated pupils, difficulty breathing, hyperventilation and shock.

Avocados. All parts of the avocado are toxic - the fruit, leaves, bark and seeds of avocados. The toxic component in the avocado is the “persin,” which is a fatty acid derivative. Symptoms of toxicity include difficulty breathing, abdominal enlargement, fluid accumulations in the chest, abdomen or around the heart. Do not feed your pet any component of the avocado.

Baking Powder and Baking Soda. Baking powder and soda are both leavening agents which produce gas and cause batter and dough to rise in baked goods. Ingestion of large amounts of these products can lead to electrolyte abnormalities (sodium, calcium and potassium for examples), which in turn, can predispose to muscles spasms (at the least) and congestive heart failure (at worse).

Chocolate. As a “chocoholic,” it pains me to tell you cannot share this beloved comfort food with your pet. Chocolate can adversely affect both the gastrointestinal tract and the nervous system. The high fat content in chocolate can cause vomiting and diarrhea. Chocolate also contains potent nervous system stimulants, caffeine and theobromine, which can be toxic to your pet in high amounts. Levels of caffeine and theobromine vary greatly depending upon the type of chocolate. White chocolate has the lowest concentration and dark or baking chocolate or cacao beans themselves have the highest concentration. Stimulant effects include panting, restlessness, hyperactivity, muscle twitching, and in severe cases, seizures. So please, no more “one for me, one for you” with the M & M’s.

Coffee. Dogs and cats that ingest coffee grounds and bean (and possibly even too much strong brewed coffee) can suffer from caffeine toxicity. Symptoms of coffee toxicity are similar to those for chocolate toxicity, and can be even more serious.

Fatty Foods. Dogs love rich and fatty foods. But they can become seriously ill if they ingest “too much of a good thing.” Overindulgence can come in the form of too many treats, too much table food or raiding the trash after a dinner party or Thanksgiving feast. Fatty foods can cause pancreatitis. Any pet can get pancreatitis, but miniature schnauzers, toy poodles, Yorkshire terriers and cocker spaniels are particularly prone to this disease. Signs include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and acute abdominal pain. Affected dogs become very sick, very quickly and often require hospitalization with IV fluids and intensive care.

Dairy Products. Dairy products are not toxic but can pose a problem for your pet. Many dairy products are high in fat and can cause pancreatitis. Pets are also lactose intolerant to variable degrees. Ingestion can result in gas and diarrhea.

Grapes and Raisins. Ingestion of too many grapes or raisins can cause kidney failure. The exact amount needed to cause toxicity is unknown, as is the mechanism of the toxicity. Therefore, our pets should not be given these foods. If ingestion is suspected, take your pet to the veterinarian where aggressive therapy can be instituted immediately.

Macadamia Nuts. As few as 6 nuts can cause signs of toxicity - weakness, depression, vomiting, difficulty walking, stiffness, lameness, tremors, abdominal pain, and/or pale gums. Signs usually dissipate within 24 hours.

Moldy or Spoiled Food. This, too, is usually a problem with our trash raiders. Signs can range from those associated with food poisoning to tremors and other neurologic signs related to some mold toxicities.

Nutmeg. High levels of this Thanksgiving pumpkin pie favorite can be toxic or fatal. The toxic principle is not well understood, but the nervous system is affected. Signs include tremors, seizures and death.

Onions or garlic. Ingestion of large amounts of onions or garlic can cause GI signs or anemia. Because dog and cats lack the enzyme necessary to properly digest these foods, gas, vomiting, diarrhea and severe GI distress can result. Ingestion of large amounts of onions or garlic can be toxic. The toxic ingredient, thiosulfate, causes red blood cells to break apart. Severe, even fatal anemia can result. All forms of onion and garlic are a problem. This includes raw, cooked, dehydrated, powdered forms and those found in prepared foods. Cats routinely fed human baby food are at risk because onion powder is often added to them for taste enhancement. Garlic pills are often given to pets as a “natural” flea control product, but if too many of the pills are consumed at one time, toxicity may result.

Xylitol. Xylitol is sugar alcohol that is used to sweeten sugar-free chewing gum, candy and other human products. Pets that ingest significant amounts of xylitol can have a precipitous drop in blood sugar, which

can causes weakness, lethargy, incoordination, seizures, collapse and death. Symptoms can begin within 30 minutes of ingestion and immediate attention is required.

Yeast Dough. When yeast-contained dough is ingested prior to cooking, the dough will “rise” and expand many times in size in the stomach just as it does on your kitchen counter when making bread. The stomach distends with gas and bloat or even stomach torsion can ensue. There is a second problem with yeast dough. As the dough rise and ferments, alcohol is produced and “alcohol toxicity” can result.

What to do if you think your pet has been poisoned. Don’t panic. Rapid response is important, but panicking will not help your pet. Take a minute to regroup and plan a course of action. **DO NOT DESTROY THE EVIDENCE.** Collect samples of “whatever” and take them with your pet to the hospital. The “whatever” could be food items, packaging, labels and even vomitus, diarrhea and urine. This will be of great benefit to your veterinarian as he or she determines what toxin(s) are involved.

Decide where you are going. Is your family veterinarian’s office open? If so, can they provide the services our pet needs? If in doubt, call them before you go and ask where you need to take your pet. If you witness your pet consuming material that you suspect might be toxic, do not hesitate to seek emergency assistance, even if you do not notice any adverse effects. Sometimes, even if poisoned, an animal may appear normal for several hours or for days after the incident.

Dr. Barber and her staff are here for you and your pet when illness strikes. But the focus at Veterinary Specialties is wellness and prevention. They partner with you to help your pet live as long and **AS WELL** as possible. To schedule a well visit, please call the Veterinary Specialties office at 828.478.3500.