

CHOCOLATE TOXICITY IN PETS

While it may be tempting to share a sweet treat with your pet at Easter time, chocolate is highly dangerous to pets and can even be fatal. Chocolate contains a compound called theobromine which acts as a central nervous system stimulant, cardiovascular stimulant causing weak, elevated heart rate and may also cause vomiting and nausea in pets. While dogs are the most commonly affected species due to their attraction to sweet foods and ability to seek out and rapidly consume significant quantities of chocolate, fatalities in other species such as cats, rats and birds have also been observed. Poisonings are most commonly seen in younger animals as they are more likely to ingest large quantities of unusual foods but animals of all ages are susceptible. Cases of poisoning are also often observed around Christmas and Easter-time when chocolates are commonly abundant in many households.

Theobromine levels differ between types of chocolate with baking/cooking chocolate containing the highest levels of theobromine followed in decreasing concentrations by sweet dark chocolate, milk chocolate and hot chocolate. White chocolate contains only small amounts of theobromine but should not be given as treats as it is high in sugar and fats. The signs of chocolate poisoning are usually observed within 12 hours of consumption and include vomiting and diarrhoea initially followed by hyperactivity and restlessness, increased urination and thirst, muscle spasms and convulsions. Theobromine toxicity can cause fatal cardiac failure which may occur 12-36 hours after ingestion.

Theobromine toxicity is dose dependent and the severity of clinical signs, if any, is influenced by the size of the animal, the type of chocolate eaten and the volume of chocolate ingested. There is no antidote for theobromine/chocolate poisoning and treatment may involve inducing vomiting, controlling seizures, washing the stomach via stomach tube to remove any remaining chocolate and intravenous fluid therapy to prevent dehydration secondary to vomiting, diarrhoea and excessive urination. In advanced cases with abnormal heart rhythms, heart medication may be needed to prevent cardiac failure. Recovery from poisoning is highly dependent on the dose of theobromine ingested and institution of prompt treatment. For the best chance of full recovery, immediate veterinary advice should be sought if you suspect your pet may have ingested any chocolate.