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Holiday toxicities

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'Tis the season to decorate with tinsel, to light aromatic candles and scent the air with cinnamon and pine diffusers, to strategically hang the mistletoe sprigs and to bake holiday treats. We make sure that our pet friends have new toys, sweaters and beds wrapped up to open on a cold holiday morning. However, there are some holiday traditions to avoid exposing your furry friend to - many are food products, but some are not.

We should all be aware of toxicities to dogs and cats if they eat chocolate, or grapes, raisins or currants, or any candy or gum sweetened with xylitol. I have included website links for each of these below, for more detail. But for this article, I'd like to focus more on non-edible items, such as liquid potpourri oils, decorative plants and tinsel.

Air room diffusers have become very popular, in which you can drop some fragrance essential oils and lightly scent the room with moisture or heat. When used properly, the oils are diluted down and pose minimal to no risk. Some of these oils have detergents in the carrier solution. These oils and detergents both can be very caustic to tissue on contact. Cats especially are prone to negative effects if they lick up a spill, or enough oils get on their fur and get absorbed into the mouth when cats groom. These oils can be corrosive to the mouth tissue, as well as stomach and intestines - causing drooling, mouth ulceration, decreased appetite or vomiting. Additionally, absorption of these oils into the bloodstream (through ingestion) can cause significant nervous system depression and low blood pressure. Any cat or dog who is prone to respiratory illness (feline asthma, canine inflammatory bronchitis) may also have a reaction when breathing in these diffused oils, even if properly prepared through the diffuser. These pets should be seen on urgent/emergency care if any of these signs are exhibited and you suspect essential oil toxicity.

Ingestion of certain decorative plants can also cause significant problems. Lily toxicity in cats causes a potentially fatal kidney failure. When caught early, this can be a reversible and curable problem, but often requires several days in the hospital on intravenous fluids and kidney support medications. Mistletoe can cause stomach upset, heart problems and erratic behavior. It contains a cellular toxin called lectin, which is more prevalent in the berries than the leaves. Holly is often very irritating to intestinal tissues, both mechanically (those little points on the leaf edges are sharp!) and through a chemical called saponin, found in the berries and leaves. Holly toxicity is usually mild to moderate and can cause drooling, vomiting, decreased appetite and lethargy. Poinsettia plant sap can be an irritant to the mouth and stomach, and can cause vomiting as well.

If a cat or dog ingests any long thin wire or string, there is significant concern that this can cause an intestinal foreign body obstruction that requires surgery. Decorations such as tinsel or electrical wires (think of the little tiny sparkly LED lights that have become popular) can be especially problematic for kittens and cats, who are attracted by the shine and movement, and don't know to NOT eat the wires. Make sure that these wires and strings are not enticing your cat to play!

Here are some informative weblinks: https://veterinarypartner.vin.com - to read about toxicities from chocolate, grapes and xylitol

ASPCA Poison Control: www.aspca.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control

FDA Holiday Hazards: www.fda.gov/animal-veterinary/animal-health-literacy/take-oh-no-out-your-and-your-pets-holiday-ho-ho-ho#Plants

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