

Human Foods that Poison Pets

Feeding pets food that we enjoy is not only wrong, it can also be fatal. There are some foodstuffs that humans relish which cause illness and death if eaten by pets.

Chocolate, macadamia nuts and onions are good examples. Each of these foods contains chemicals which rarely cause problems for humans, but for dogs, these same chemicals can be deadly.

Chocolate toxicity

Chocolate contains theobromine, a compound that is a cardiac stimulant and a diuretic. When affected by an overdose of chocolate, a dog can become excited and hyperactive. Due to the diuretic effect, it may pass large volumes of urine and it will be unusually thirsty. Vomiting and diarrhea are also common. The effect of theobromine on the heart is the most dangerous effect. Theobromine will either increase the dog's heart rate or may cause the heart to beat irregularly. Death is quite possible, especially with exercise.

After their pet has eaten a large quantity of chocolate, many pet owners assume their pet is unaffected. However, the signs of sickness may not be seen for several hours, with death following within twenty-four hours.

Cocoa powder and cooking chocolate are the most toxic forms. A 10-kilogram dog can be seriously affected if it eats a quarter of a 250gm packet of cocoa powder or half of a 250gm block of cooking chocolate. These forms of chocolate contain ten times more theobromine than milk chocolate. Thus, a chocolate mud cake could be a real health risk for a small dog. Even licking a substantial part of the chocolate icing from a cake can make a dog unwell.

Semi-sweet chocolate and dark chocolate are the next most dangerous forms, with milk chocolate being the least dangerous. A dog needs to eat more than a 250gm block of milk chocolate to be affected. Obviously, the smaller the dog, the less it needs to eat.

Onion and garlic poisoning

Onions and garlic are other dangerous food ingredients that cause sickness in dogs, cats and also livestock. Onions and garlic contain the toxic ingredient thiosulphate. Onions are more of a danger.

Pets affected by onion toxicity will develop haemolytic anaemia, where the pet's red blood cells burst while circulating in its body.

At first, pets affected by onion poisoning show gastroenteritis with vomiting and diarrhoea. They will show no interest in food and will be dull and weak. The red pigment from the burst blood cells appears in an affected animal's urine and it becomes breathless. The breathlessness occurs because the red blood cells that carry oxygen through the body are reduced in number.

The poisoning occurs a few days after the pet has eaten the onion. All forms of onion can be a problem including dehydrated onions, raw onions, cooked onions and table scraps containing cooked onions and/or garlic. Left over pizza, Chinese dishes and commercial baby food containing onion, sometimes fed as a supplement to young pets, can cause illness.

Onion poisoning can occur with a single ingestion of large quantities or with repeated meals containing small amounts of onion. A single meal of 600 to 800 grams of raw onion can be dangerous whereas a ten-kilogram dog, fed 150 grams of onion for several days, is also likely to develop anaemia. The condition improves once the dog is prevented from eating any further onion

While garlic also contains the toxic ingredient thiosulphate, it seems that garlic is less toxic and large amounts would need to be eaten to cause illness.

The danger of macadamia nuts

Macadamia nuts are another concern. A recent paper written by Dr. Ross McKenzie, a Veterinary Pathologist with the Department of Primary Industries, points to the danger of raw and roasted macadamia nuts for pets.

The toxic compound is unknown but the affect of macadamia nuts is to cause locomotory difficulties. Dogs develop a tremor of the skeletal muscles, and weakness or paralysis of the hindquarters. Affected dogs are often unable to rise and are distressed, usually panting. Some affected dogs have swollen limbs and show pain when the limbs are manipulated.

Dogs have been affected by eating as few as six macadamia kernels (nuts without the shell) while others had eaten approximately forty kernels. Some dogs had also been given macadamia butter.

Luckily, the muscle weakness, while painful, seems to be of short duration and all dogs recovered from the toxicity. All dogs were taken to their veterinary surgeon.

Pet owners should not assume that human food is always safe for pets. When it comes to chocolate, onions, garlic and macadamia nuts, such foods should be given in only small quantities, or not at all. Be sure that your pets can't get into your stash of chocolates, that food scraps are disposed of carefully to prevent onion and garlic toxicity and that your dog is prevented from picking up macadamia nuts if you have a tree in your garden.

Other potential dangers

- Avocado (all parts) - the toxic ingredient in avocado is called persin (toxic amount unknown). Most documented cases of poisoning have been in livestock that have eaten all parts of the avocado and in large amounts. The toxin may be confined to the leaves, bark, skin or seed but the flesh is thought to be poisonous to birds.
- Pear pips, the kernels of plums, peaches and apricots, apple core pips (contain cyanogenic glycosides resulting in cyanide poisoning)
- Potato peelings and green looking potatoes
- Rhubarb leaves
- Moldy/spoiled foods (keep garbage lid firmly on)
- Alcohol
- Yeast dough
- Coffee grounds, beans & tea (caffeine)
- Hops (used in home brewing)
- Tomato leaves & stems (green parts)
- Broccoli (in large amounts)
- Raisins and grapes
- Cigarettes, tobacco, cigars
- Xylitol (sweetener often found in sugar-free gum)
- Cooked bones - they can splinter and cause gut perforation, as well as blockages in the intestine, tooth fractures, and cooked chop bones can get stuck across the roof of the mouth
- Corn cobs - a common cause of intestinal blockage requiring surgical removal