

Pet-Proofing Against Poison: A Crucial Guide for Pet Owners

Uncover the surprising household hazards that could endanger your furry friends. From the medication in your cabinet to the plants in your living room, learn how to safeguard your pets against common yet potentially lethal toxins lurking in plain sight.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- About half of the calls received by the Pet Poison Helpline involve items that are safe for humans but toxic to pets
- The first step to protecting your pet is knowing which household substances may be poisonous
- Prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medications for humans earned the No. 1 and No. 2 spots on the Animal Poison Control Center's top toxin list
- Plants, both indoors and outdoors, can also pose a danger to pets, as can foods, including grapes/raisins and chocolate
- Xylitol, sometimes known as birch sugar, is a sugar alcohol that's toxic to dogs

March is National Pet Poison Prevention Month, a perfect time to run through your home and check for common — and not-so-common — pet poisons. About half of the calls received by the Pet Poison Helpline involve items that are safe for humans but toxic to pets.

"It only takes a few minutes to educate yourself on how to avoid these situations. Appropriate pet-proofing and awareness of what to do in the event of a pet poisoning situation could spare you and your pet trips to the veterinarian for expensive, but life-saving treatments," notes Dr. Justine Lee, associate director of veterinary services for Pet Poison Helpline.¹

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Prescription and Over-the-Counter Medications

Prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medications for humans earned the No. 1 and No. 2 spots on the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' (ASPCA) Animal Poison Control Center's (APCC) top toxin list.² Close to 50% of calls to the Pet Poison Helpline also involve OTC and prescription medications for humans. The **top 10 medication poisons for pets** to be aware of include:³

- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs), such as Advil, Aleve and Motrin
- Acetaminophen (i.e., Tylenol)
- Antidepressants

- ADD/ADHD medications, such as Concerta, Adderall and Ritalin
- Benzodiazepines and sleep aids, such as Xanax, Klonopin, Ambien and Lunesta)
- Birth control pills
- ACE inhibitors for high blood pressure
- Beta-blockers
- Thyroid hormones
- Cholesterol-lowering drugs, such as Lipitor, Zocor and Crestor

Even supplements, like vitamin D and melatonin,⁴ can be toxic to pets in the wrong doses. “Over-the-counter pain medications, prescription painkillers, vitamins, antidepressants, and stimulant/recreational medication exposures are very common,” Dr. Christine Rutter, clinical associate professor of emergency medicine at the Texas A&M School of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences, explained in a news release.⁵

“Medication exposure usually happens because of dropped medication or when a pet has access to a bottle or a bag containing the medication,” she says.⁶ Because of pets’ small size compared to people, even a single pill or dose of a human medication can be life-threatening. Remember that dogs can easily break into plastic pill bottles, even if they’re “safety-proofed,” so all medications should be stored safely out of pets’ reach.

Plants and Popular Foods Can Poison Pets

Plants, both indoors and outdoors, can also pose a danger to pets. “Because so many households keep ornamental plants or aren’t familiar with the toxicity of certain cut flowers, toxic plant exposure is also common, with symptoms ranging from mild discomfort and gastrointestinal upset to life-limiting organ failure,” Rutter said.⁷

“Owners should know the names and toxicity level of any plants in the house or yard; for example, sago palms, true lilies (for cats), yew plants, and some mushrooms can be extremely toxic,” she continued.⁸ **Plants that can be poisonous** to pets include:⁹

- Amaryllis
- Autumn crocus
- Azalea
- Boxwood
- Castor Bean
- Chrysanthemum
- Clematis
- Cyclamen
- Dieffenbachia (dumb cane)
- Daffodil
- Elephant’s ear
- English Ivy
- Foxglove

- Hyacinth
- Iris
- Japanese yew
- Lilies
- Lily-of-the-Valle
- Morning glory
- Nightshade
- Oleander
- Peace lily
- Philodendron
- Pothos
- Rhododendron
- Sago palm
- Schefflera

As far as foods, grapes/raisins and chocolate are toxic to pets. Plants of the genus allium, which includes **onions**, chives, garlic and leeks, make some pets sick and can even be fatal, although not every pet is affected. Any raw dough that includes yeast is also a hazard, as it will ferment in your dog's stomach, releasing carbon dioxide and alcohol that can be deadly.¹⁰

Keep Xylitol Away From Your Pets, Especially Dogs

Xylitol, sometimes known as birch sugar, is a sugar alcohol that's toxic to dogs. Xylitol is dangerous to dogs because it's absorbed into their bloodstream much faster than in humans, leading to a quick and significant release of insulin from the pancreas.

This rapid release can cause a severe drop in blood sugar levels (hypoglycemia) within 10 to 60 minutes after ingestion, which can be life-threatening if not treated promptly.¹¹ Some dogs may also experience liver failure after consuming xylitol.¹²

Xylitol is found in many products that you might not suspect, so it's important to scour labels carefully for it and birch sugar. Examples of foods that commonly contain xylitol or birch sugar include:¹³

- Chewing gum
- Candy
- Ice cream
- Dietary supplements, including chewy or gummy vitamins
- Liquid compounded medications, including gabapentin
- Mouthwash
- Sugar-free desserts

- Breath mints
- Peanut butter

Know the Symptoms of Pet Intoxication

If you suspect your pet has consumed something toxic, act immediately — don't wait for signs of illness. Prompt action may help limit the toxin's absorption. Rush your pet to an emergency vet, providing detailed information about the ingested toxin. Quick medical intervention can be life-saving. And keep in mind that pet poisoning can result in a wide variety of symptoms.

“Symptoms of pets ingesting toxins can be anything — including altered mentation, or any change in normal behavior, which can include excitability, anxiety, compulsive behavior, decreased consciousness, or apathy to their surroundings; drooling; seizures; tremors; weakness; excessive thirst; vomiting; or abnormal bleeding or bruising,” Rutter said.¹⁴

“Some toxins will have delayed onset of clinical signs, which means that the owner would not likely notice any changes in their pet for up to 10 days. In some cases, the delay is too late to prevent permanent organ damage,” she explains.¹⁵ You can also contact the Pet Poison Helpline 24/7 at 855-764-7661 for information regarding potential poisoning of all animal species. They also have emergency instructions on hand, which include:¹⁶

- Remove your pet from the area.
- Check to make sure your pet is safe: breathing and acting normally.
- Do NOT give any home antidotes.
- Do NOT induce vomiting without consulting a vet or Pet Poison Helpline.
- Call Pet Poison Helpline at 855-764-7661.
- If veterinary attention is necessary, contact your veterinarian or emergency veterinary clinic immediately.

Sources and References

¹ [Pet Poison Helpline, National Poison Prevention Week](#)

² [ASPCA March 9, 2022](#)

³ [Pet Poison Helpline, Top 10 Human Medications Poisonous to Pets](#)

⁴ [Pet Poison Helpline, Toxin Trends](#)

^{5,6,7,8,14,15} [Texas A&M University, Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences October 12, 2023](#)

⁹ [The Daily Reporter February 24, 2021](#)

¹⁰ [Pet Poison Helpline, Bread Dough](#)

¹¹ [U.S. FDA, Paws Off Xylitol; It's Dangerous for Dogs](#)

¹² [The Courier Express October 12, 2023](#)

¹³ [Colorado State University October 8, 2021](#)

¹⁶ [Pet Poison Helpline, Emergency Instructions](#)
