

Never Let Your Pet Nibble on This – Could Lead to Paralysis and Even Death

If your pet decides this is a tasty dinner, it could mean death, or at least a critical medical emergency. It can easily cause paralyzed limbs and respiratory muscles. Be alert to this animal hazard, whether in your yard or farther afield.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Botulism is a potentially deadly type of poisoning acquired by eating spoiled raw meat, dead animals, or decaying vegetable matter
- The disease is extremely rare in cats, and most dogs are resistant to the more severe effects of this type of poisoning
- Botulism causes weakness that can progress to paralysis of all four limbs. Other clinical signs include trouble chewing and swallowing, vomiting, and abdominal pain
- Treatment includes giving a type C antitoxin and supportive care depending on the severity of symptoms
- To prevent botulism, pets should never have access to spoiled raw meat or animal carcasses

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published May 24, 2015.

Botulism is a rare but potentially fatal form of poisoning that can result from eating spoiled raw meat, dead animals, or decaying vegetable matter infected with the *Clostridium botulinum* type C neurotoxin.

Clostridium botulinum is a gram-positive, rod-shaped, anaerobic, spore-forming, motile bacterium with the ability to produce the neurotoxin botulinum.

Symptoms of Botulism

Dogs are generally resistant to the more severe effects of *Clostridium botulinum*, and the disease is almost unheard of in cats.

Once ingested, it can take a few hours to a few days for botulism symptoms to appear. The bacteria's neurotoxin causes weakness that begins in an animal's back legs and moves forward into the trunk, neck, and front legs, ultimately causing paralysis of all four limbs.

Other signs of botulism include difficulty chewing and swallowing, drooling, vomiting, abdominal pain, and dry eyes.

Diagnosis

Your veterinarian will need to know if your pet has potentially had contact with spoiled meat or a dead animal. He or she will perform a thorough physical exam and order a blood chemistry profile, complete blood count, and urinalysis.

Your pet's blood will also be tested for the presence of the *Clostridium botulinum* neurotoxin. A stool or vomit sample may also be taken to check for presence of the toxin.

Chest x-rays may be required to check the health of the lungs and the upper gastrointestinal tract, since botulism intoxication has the potential to paralyze the respiratory muscles.

Treatment Options

A type C antitoxin for botulism will be given to neutralize the toxin and prevent further progression of the disease. Additional treatment will depend on the severity of your pet's condition. I have found the homeopathic remedy *Botulinum* to be very beneficial.

A dog that is only mildly affected may still require hospitalization for intravenous (IV) fluids and feeding. A severely ill animal who is having trouble breathing due to paralysis of the respiratory muscles must be closely monitored in an intensive care unit-type setting.

A stomach tube may be needed for feeding, and the animal may require a ventilator to assist with breathing in worst-case scenarios. Complete recovery from botulism intoxication usually takes from one to three weeks.

Preventing Botulism

It's important to never allow your pet to eat dead animal carcasses or spoiled raw meat.

Some people mistakenly believe that because dogs and cats can handle a much higher bacterial load from their food than humans, they can literally eat anything and be fine. That's just not true — your dog or cat can absolutely get food poisoning.

It's never a good idea to feed your pet something that could be spoiled or has been left in the fridge for several weeks. My motto is when in doubt, throw it out.

How to Safely Feed a Raw Diet to Your Pet

I want to emphasize that botulism is rarely seen in pets, and it is the result of rotten — not raw — meat. I'm a strong advocate of feeding fresh raw meat diets to dogs and cats, and for those of you who are thinking about switching a pet to a more species-appropriate diet, please know that you can feed raw very safely (despite what you may have heard elsewhere, including from your own veterinarian).

In order to prevent parasites (roundworms, hookworms, tapeworms, etc.) from invading your pet's homemade raw diet, we simply avoid including the guts — the stomach and small and large intestines — in the meat mix. These are the organs that harbor parasites. If you're buying commercially available raw pet food, the guts have already been removed.

Muscle meat is used to prepare raw food diets, and muscle meat is sterile except in rare instances when parasites escape the gastrointestinal tract (guts) and travel there. For example, certain parasites like *Toxoplasma gondii*, which causes toxoplasmosis, can get into muscle meat and make your pet sick.

This is why you should freeze raw meats (the length of time varies for different parasites, three weeks will kill all of them) before feeding them to your dog or cat. By freezing meats before serving, and by removing the guts of prey species, you can successfully avoid exposing your raw fed pet to parasites.

Concerned About Salmonella in Raw Diets?

Ironically, salmonella is the reason for most recalls of processed pet foods — not raw diets. Yet despite this irrefutable fact, many veterinarians and pet nutritionists continue to warn people away from raw feeding with dire warnings about salmonella contamination.

There are over 1,800 species of salmonella. It is a bacteria that lives in many different species of mammals, including dogs and cats, who typically harbor the species known as *Salmonella typhimurium*.¹

Your dog or cat has salmonella in his gastrointestinal tract much of the time, whether you feed raw foods or processed, dry food. It's not some scary foreign invader in your pet's gut — it's a bug his body is quite familiar with.

An abundance of pathologic salmonella species can cause problems for some animals based on their age, nutritional status, the presence of cancer or neoplasia, other diseases, stress, and the administration of antibiotics, steroids, or chemotherapy.

Your Pet's Body Is Designed to Handle a Significant Bacterial Load

Healthy dogs and cats are built to handle bacterial loads from food that would cause significant illness in you or me. Your pet's body is well-equipped to deal with heavy doses of familiar and strange bacteria because nature built him to catch, kill, and immediately consume his prey.

Your dog's or cat's stomach is highly acidic, with a pH range of 1-2.5. Nothing much can survive that acidic environment — it exists to keep your pet safe from potentially contaminated raw meat and other consumables.

In addition to the acid, dogs and cats also naturally produce a tremendous amount of bile. Bile is both antiparasitic and antipathogenic. So if something potentially harmful isn't entirely neutralized by stomach acid, the bile is a secondary defense. And your pet's powerful pancreatic enzymes also help break down and digest food.

Keeping Your Pet's GI Tract in Top Form

There are three important steps in helping to keep your pet's digestive system strong and resilient enough to handle a heavy bacterial load, and to support overall immune function:

- Minimize stress by feeding a species-appropriate diet, the kind your dog or cat is meant to eat. It's important to feed meat-based food to your carnivorous dog or cat.

- Minimize the drugs your pet takes, such as antibiotics. Reseed the gut during and after antibiotic therapy with a probiotic. It's also a good idea to maintain your dog or cat on a daily probiotic to balance the ratio of good to bad bacteria (gut flora).
- A good-quality digestive enzyme and probiotic will also help your pet's body get the most out of the food you feed.

Sources and References

¹ Carter, Margery E. and Quinn, P. Joseph. "Salmonella infections in dogs and cats". *Salmonella in Domestic Animals* (2000):231-244
