

Could Your Holiday Cheer Be Hiding a Hidden Hazard?

The holidays are meant to be joyful, not stressful. So as you deck the halls, pour the cocoa, and wrap the gifts, remember that the real spirit of the holiday includes making sure every member of the family, pets included, has a happy and hazard-free season.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Holiday celebrations bring hidden dangers for pets — from rich foods and chocolate to festive décor — that can quickly turn joy into an emergency if not managed safely
- Common seasonal foods like onions, grapes, cocoa, xylitol-sweetened treats, and fatty leftovers can cause severe illness in pets; stick to pet-safe snacks and keep human food out of reach
- Glittering décor, tinsel, ornaments, and electrical cords attract curious cats and dogs but pose choking, poisoning, or electrocution hazards. Secure your decorations and choose pet-friendly alternatives
- Guests, noise, and disrupted routines can cause stress and anxiety for pets. Providing a quiet retreat and keeping identification updated helps prevent escapes and accidents
- Simple precautions, such as smart decorating, safe foods, pet-proofing, and emergency readiness, let you enjoy the holidays while ensuring your furry companions stay healthy, calm, and hazard-free

The holidays are a time of twinkling lights, family gatherings, delicious meals, and cheerful traditions. But while you are unwrapping gifts or toasting to the season, your pet might be facing dangers that go unnoticed amid the festivities. From tempting treats to shiny decorations, the season's delights can quickly turn into distress if your furry friend gets too curious.

The good news? With a little awareness and preparation, you can celebrate the season while keeping your pet safe and stress-free.

The Festive Feast — Tempting but Treacherous

Food is the centerpiece of most holiday celebrations, but many of our favorite dishes can be dangerous, or even deadly, to pets. It is easy to slip your dog or cat a little taste of turkey or dessert, but that innocent treat might have ingredients that could send you rushing to the emergency clinic. Make sure to keep these foods out of your pet's reach:^{1,2,3}

- **Chocolate** — This sweet treat tops the list of holiday hazards. It contains theobromine, a compound that dogs and cats cannot process. Even a small amount of dark chocolate can cause vomiting, diarrhea, tremors, or worse. Keep all chocolate desserts — brownies, fudge, truffles, and even cocoa powder — far from reach.
- **Sweets and baked goods** — Many holiday desserts and candies are made with xylitol, a common artificial sweetener found in sugar-free gum, cookies, and peanut butter. Even tiny amounts can cause a dangerous

drop in blood sugar and fatal liver damage in dogs.

- **Rich table scraps** — Gravy, buttery sides, or meat skin might be delicious to you but can cause pancreatitis in pets, a painful inflammation of the pancreas that leads to vomiting, fever, and abdominal pain.
- **Onions, leeks, and chives** — Often used in stuffing and sauces, these can damage red blood cells, leading to anemia. And do not forget grapes and raisins, which can cause kidney failure even in small amounts.
- **Unbaked yeast dough** — When eaten, it can expand in your pet's stomach, causing severe bloating and gas. The fermenting yeast can produce alcohol that leads to intoxication.
- **Bones** — Cooked or raw bones are choking hazards and can splinter, puncturing your pet's throat or intestines. Dispose of them securely in a covered trash bin outside or behind a locked door.

And speaking of alcohol, never leave unattended drinks where pets can reach them. Even small amounts can cause vomiting, disorientation, and fatal alcohol poisoning.

Signs of food-related toxicity can include vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite, shaking, or lethargy. If you suspect your pet ate something harmful, call your veterinarian right away or reach out to these numbers below. Quick action can save a life — do not wait for symptoms to worsen.

- **ASPCA Poison Control Center** — 888-426-4435
- **Pet Poison Helpline** — 855-764-7661

Dangerous Décor — Pretty but Perilous

Holiday decorations bring magic to your home, but they also bring risks for curious paws and whiskers. Shiny, dangling, and glowing objects are practically irresistible to pets, especially cats and puppies.

For example, your Christmas tree might be a wonder to look at, but to your pet, it is a jungle gym covered in chew toys. Cats love to climb and may topple the entire tree, while dogs might knock it over trying to fetch a dangling ornament. Secure your tree to the ceiling or wall using fishing line, and use a sturdy, weighted base to prevent tipping.^{4,5}

Tree water can also be a hidden danger. Stagnant water grows bacteria, and additives (like fertilizers or preservatives) can be toxic. Always cover the base or use a pet-proof barrier.

Glass ornaments can shatter and cut paws or mouths. Even non-breakable decorations can cause choking or intestinal blockage if swallowed. Avoid food-based ornaments (like salt dough, popcorn strings, or gingerbread) — your pet will not understand that they are just for display.⁶

Tinsel, ribbons, and garlands are particularly hazardous for cats, who love to bat at and chew shiny strands. Ingesting even a small piece can cause intestinal twisting (medically known as linear foreign body obstruction), requiring emergency surgery. It is best to skip tinsel altogether — your décor can sparkle without the risk.⁷

Chewing on wires or light cords can lead to electric shock or severe burns. Use cord protectors, hide wires behind furniture, and unplug decorations when you are not home. Also, be mindful of batteries in new gadgets or toys — if swallowed, they can cause internal burns or poisoning.

Candles and oil lamps create cozy holiday glow, but they are easy for wagging tails or curious noses to knock over. Never leave a lit candle unattended and consider battery-operated alternatives for safety.

Some of the most iconic holiday plants are also the most dangerous. Here is a list of foliage to keep away from your pets:^{8,9}

- **Poinsettias** — Mildly toxic; can cause drooling and stomach upset.
- **Holly and mistletoe** — Can cause vomiting, diarrhea, and even heart problems (slow heart rate and low blood pressure).
- **Amaryllis** — Leads to vomiting, drooling, and abdominal pain.
- **Lilies** — Extremely toxic to cats — even a small amount can cause kidney failure.
- **Pine and cedar** — Sap and needles can irritate mouths and stomachs.

If you love greenery, consider faux plants or pet-safe alternatives like spider plants, ferns, or orchids.

Guests, Gatherings, and Stressful Situations

The holidays often mean more people, noise, and activity, which can overwhelm even the friendliest pets. Dogs and cats thrive on routine, and sudden changes can cause anxiety, fear, or unwanted behaviors. Follow these tips to keep both your guests and pets happy and safe:¹⁰

- **Give your pet a safe space** — Before guests arrive, set up a quiet retreat where your pet can relax away from the commotion. Use a separate room or crate stocked with familiar items like a bed, blanket, or favorite toy. Soft music or a white-noise machine can also help drown out noise.

If your pet tends to be shy or nervous around visitors, let them decide when (or if) they want to interact. Forcing socialization can make anxiety worse.

- **Communicate with your guests** — Let your guests know you have pets, especially if someone has allergies or a weakened immune system. Remind visitors not to feed your pets table scraps or leave doors open. If other guests are bringing their own pets, supervise introductions carefully to prevent fights or stress.

If your pet becomes overly anxious around guests, talk to your veterinarian. They can recommend calming aids, supplements, or behavior modification strategies.

- **Guard the door and the trash** — Excited pets might dart out as guests arrive or leave. Make sure your pet's ID tags and microchip information are up to date, just in case.

Keep food scraps and wrapping materials away from your pet. Ribbons, bows, and packaging can be tempting to play with or eat, leading to choking or intestinal blockage. Dispose of trash promptly and securely.

Traveling with Your Pet — Safety on the Go

Whether you are hitting the road or taking to the skies, planning ahead can keep your pet safe while traveling. If you are driving, your pet should always be safely restrained. Use a harness that clips into the seatbelt or a well-ventilated carrier secured with a seatbelt.

Never let your pet roam freely in the car or ride in the bed of a truck. And do not leave them alone in a parked vehicle; temperatures can rise or drop quickly, even in mild weather. Before you leave, pack for your pet just like you would for yourself:

- Food and water
- Medications
- Medical records and ID
- Favorite toys or blankets
- Waste bags or litter supplies
- First-aid kit

Make sure you know the location of emergency veterinary clinics along your route.

Flying can be especially stressful and risky for some animals, particularly short-nosed breeds like bulldogs, pugs, and Persian cats, who are prone to breathing issues. Always talk with your veterinarian before booking a flight, and check airline policies for pet travel requirements.¹¹

Hidden Hazards You Might Not Expect

Beyond the obvious dangers, there are a few sneaky hazards that might surprise you. Here are some examples:¹²

- **Snow globes** — Many snow globes contain ethylene glycol, the same toxic ingredient found in antifreeze. Its sweet taste can attract pets, but even a small amount can be deadly. Keep snow globes high on shelves and clean up immediately if one breaks.
- **Salt and ice melt** — Ice-melting salts can irritate your pet's paws and, if licked off, can cause serious electrolyte imbalances. Choose pet-safe de-icing products, and wipe your pet's paws with a damp cloth after walks.
- **Salt dough ornaments** — Made from flour, salt, and water, these are also dangerous. They might look like harmless crafts, but if eaten, the high salt content can cause poisoning.
- **Medications and bags** — When guests visit, remind them to store medications securely. Many pills — from pain relievers to antidepressants — can be toxic to pets. Ask guests to keep purses and suitcases zipped and off the floor, where curious noses might explore.

Managing Stress During the Holidays

The excitement of the holidays can be just as stressful for pets as it is for people. Loud noises, changing routines, and unfamiliar faces can make your pet feel anxious or overstimulated. Watch for signs like:

- Hiding or pacing
- Excessive grooming or panting
- Whining or growling
- Avoiding food or sleep

- Urinating or defecating off schedule or inappropriately

These are your pet’s way of saying, “I need a break.” Give them space and reassurance.

Stick to your pet’s normal feeding and walking schedule as much as possible. Provide mental stimulation with puzzle feeders or chew toys, especially if your pet is cooped up during gatherings. You can also use pheromone diffusers or calming sprays designed for dogs or cats.

If fireworks or loud parties are part of your celebrations, keep your pet in a quiet, secure room with the TV or radio on for background noise. Close curtains to block flashing lights and keep them safe inside until the noise passes.

A Pet-Safe Celebration — Small Steps, Big Difference

You do not have to cancel your holiday fun to keep your pet safe — just make a few thoughtful adjustments.

- **Decorate smartly** — Choose shatterproof ornaments, avoid tinsel, and secure your tree.
- **Set boundaries** — Keep food, drinks, and candles out of reach.
- **Create calm** — Offer quiet spaces and maintain routines.
- **Plan ahead** — Have your veterinarian’s number and emergency resources ready.
- **Spread awareness** — Remind guests and family about what is safe — and what is not — for your furry friend.

By taking these precautions, you can ensure your pet enjoys the holidays right alongside you — safely, happily, and without a single emergency veterinary visit.

Sources and References

^{1,4,10,11} [AVMA, Winter holiday pet safety](#)
^{2,6,8} [Pet Health Harbour, December 15, 2024](#)
^{3,5,7,9,12} [ASPCA, Holiday Safety Tips](#)
