

Chocolate Toxicity in Cats and Dogs

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Q. Is chocolate really poisonous to cats?

A. Face it, many cats love chocolate. And, because we love chocolate too, we have probably contributed to our pets' taste for this treat. But for cats, this 'treat' can be deadly.

Chocolate toxicity is one of the most common 'poisonings' we see in veterinary clinics, especially during the busy holiday season (and Valentine's Day). We know to keep that chocolate box especially for guests or that gift box of chocolates out of Fluffy's or Fido's reach. But it is easy to overlook holiday baking with its more deadly chocolate forms – semisweet chips and baking chocolate.

Some cats tolerate chocolate better than others. Although the toxic dosage varies from animal to animal, everyone agrees that chocolate contains a lethal ingredient, a methylxanthine called theobromine, and that baking chocolate contains 10 times more of this lethal ingredient than milk chocolate.

Theobromine acts on four areas of your cat's body:

- It increases the rate and force of contractions of the heart.
- It acts as a diuretic, causing your pet to lose body fluids.
- It affects the gastrointestinal system, causing vomiting and diarrhea and it may cause stomach ulcers.
- It acts on the nervous system, causing convulsions, seizures and sometimes, death.

If you find that your cat has ingested some chocolate, call your veterinarian or emergency clinic immediately. They will probably ask you the size of your cat, the type and quantity of chocolate your cat has eaten, and how long ago it was eaten. Try to have these answers before you call. They then may tell you to make your cat vomit. This will depend on the amount of chocolate ingested and how long ago it was eaten. If your veterinarian or emergency clinic determine that your cat needs to come into the hospital, do not delay. The effects of chocolate toxicity may not be apparent right away, but do not let that lull you into a false sense of security.