# Holiday Safety Tips for Cats

*Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff*

We want the holidays to be a happy time for you and your pet, not a time for an emergency visit to your veterinarian. The food and decorations that make the holidays so much fun for us can be dangerous for your pet. We do not want this article to dampen your holiday spirits, but we do want you to be aware of the dangers and plan carefully to avoid these potential hazards.

Food – Related Items

Holiday foods we enjoy cooking and eating can be a problem for your pet.

Rich, fatty foods, like gravy or grease, can cause problems ranging from stomach upsets to pancreatitis, which is an inflammation of the pancreas resulting in pain, vomiting, and dehydration. Cats with this serious condition often require hospitalization for treatment.

Alcohol can cause serious intoxications in pets, and many pets are attracted to it. Clean up glasses after holiday parties. Cats are often attracted by the sweet taste of drinks, especially eggnog.

Chocolate, coffee, and tea all contain dangerous components called xanthines, which cause nervous system or urinary system damage and heart muscle stimulation. Although chocolate ingestion is more of a problem in dogs, cats may also have signs ranging from diarrhea to seizures and death. Unsweetened baking chocolate and dark chocolate are the worst culprits, but all chocolate, fudge, and other candy should be placed out of your cat's reach.

Uncooked meat, fish, and poultry can contain disease-causing bacteria, such as *E. coli*, and parasites such as *Toxoplasma gondii*. These uncooked foods should not be given to your cat. For your own health, as well as your pet's, wash utensils that have been in contact with raw meat, and cook meat thoroughly.

Bones from fish, meat, or poultry can also cause problems if swallowed. Even small bones can splinter causing lacerations (tearing) throughout the intestinal tract. So, no matter how big or how little they are, be sure to keep bones (other than those that are specially sterilized and treated) away from your pet.

Tobacco products can be fatal to pets, if ingested. Signs of poisoning develop within 15 to 45 minutes and include excitation, salivation, vomiting, and diarrhea. Pets may develop seizures, collapse and die from cardiac arrest. Keep cigarettes, cigars, tobacco, nicotine gum and patches, and ashtrays out of the reach of pets. Empty ashtrays frequently since cigarette butts contain about 25% of the total nicotine in a cigarette.

Uncooked yeast dough can expand and produce gas in the digestive system, causing pain and possible rupture of the stomach or intestines.

Grapes and raisins contain an unknown toxin, which can damage the kidneys.

Remember, cats have an exceptional sense of smell – juices on plastic or aluminum foil left on countertops are very tempting. If ingested, plastic or foil wrap (cellophane candy wrappers or food wrap) can cause choking or intestinal obstruction.

Meat-soaked strings from rump roasts are also enticing. Ingestion can cause a surgical emergency called a 'linear string foreign body' in the intestines.

To be safe, put away food immediately and pet-proof your garbage. Garbage contains all kinds of other hazards for your cat such as plastic wrap and bags, 6-pack beverage holders that could cause strangulation, fat trimmings, bones, and pieces of ribbon or tinsel.

Feed your pet(s) before a party so they will not be so apt to beg or steal food.

Poisonous Plants

We all like making our homes more festive for the holidays. We enjoy the green foliage and colorful flowers of plants. Unfortunately, many of the plants we have in our homes during the holidays can be poisonous to pets. If ingested, holly (leaves and berries) causes stomach upset and can be potentially fatal to both cats and dogs. Mistletoe upsets stomachs and can cause heart collapse, while hibiscus may cause diarrhea. Poinsettias have an irritating sap that can cause blistering in the mouth and stomach upset. So when you brighten up your home, place these plants well out of your cat's reach, or use imitation holiday plants.

Decorations and Wrappings

All that glitters is not gold – it could be dangerous for your pet.

Ribbons, yarn, and string can cause intestinal obstruction and bunching of the intestine along the length of the string. These conditions require surgery and can be fatal. Ribbons around your cat's neck may be cute, but they can also be dangerous.



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Adhesives and glues can be toxic and are often attractive to animals.

Potpourri contains oils that can be toxic to cats if eaten. We may not think of eating it, but some curious pets may.

Candles can cause burns and fires. Never leave lighted candles unattended or within reach of your pet.

Gifts Under the Tree

Edible items left under the tree can be very tempting, and remember that companies (even Drs. Foster & Smith!) often package pet gifts wrapped in ribbon. Make sure to remove ribbons or ties before you present gifts to your cat. If played with and swallowed, yarn, ribbon, or string on gifts can cause intestinal obstruction, requiring surgery.

Perfumes and aftershaves contain ethanol (alcohol), and perfume also contains essential oils which can be very toxic to cats if ingested.

Batteries for toys or other gifts can be toxic and cause intestinal obstruction. Keep in a safe place until they are ready to be inserted in the gift.

Christmas Trees

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, how careful we must be. Christmas trees and their decorations can create hazards for pets.

Place Christmas trees in a stable stand, and attach the tree securely to a window or wall with something like fish line. We have known others who have hung their tree from the ceiling! To keep pets away from the tree, it may help to use a Scat Mat. Even though you take precautions, make sure your cat is always supervised when in a room with a tree.

Tree needles can be toxic and cause mouth and stomach irritation. Even needles and the wire of artificial trees could pose a problem. Be sure your cat is not chewing on branches or eating fallen needles.

Tinsel's shininess is attractive to pets. When eaten, it can cause blockages, which often require surgery to remove. Leave it off the tree altogether.

Angel hair, flocking, and artificial snow are mildly toxic. If consumed in larger amounts, however, they could cause blockage of the intestine. Try decorating with something less likely to cause a problem.

Chewing on electrical cords, including cords of lights can cause problems ranging from burned mouths, to electrical shock to death by electrocution. Some larger lights can become quite hot, and could also cause burns. Unplug decorative lights when you are not there, use pet-proof extension cords, and spray cords with a product such as Bitter Apple or Chew Stop.

Cats may knock glass ornaments off of trees, which could cause cuts on paw pads and a trip to the emergency clinic. Sharp ornament hooks can also become imbedded in your pet's mouth or esophagus. Place ornaments that are shiny, or could be swallowed or broken high up on your tree. Larger, less intriguing ornaments can go near the bottom.

Decorating trees with food is asking for problems. Candy canes and gingerbread people can be as enticing to your pet as they are to children. We know of one diabetic dog who ran into some problems with regulating her disease because she was stealing candy canes off of the tree; cats may try this, too. Popcorn, raisin, or cranberry garlands are beautiful, but can cause an obstruction when eaten, requiring surgery.

Because tree preservatives are often sugar-based (and inviting to pets) and because the water stands so long, the water in the tree stand often harbors potentially harmful bacteria. Fertilizers, insecticides, or flame retardants that were used on the tree may also get into the water. Cover the stand with a tree skirt or use other means to prevent access to the water.

Visitors

Some pets love visitors and behave very well. Others may be fearful or aggressive. Plan for how your cat will react to visitors.

A quiet room, away from the commotion, with water, food, and litter box available will help fearful cats be more comfortable.

Brushing up on obedience training before the holidays may help a pet who has become a little rusty. Be sure to inform your visitors of any household 'rules' or problem behaviors concerning your pets, e.g., sneaking out the door, jumping up on the couch, getting food from the table, etc.

For pets who may not behave or could be aggressive, placing them in a separate room, using pet gates, or having them stay at a friend's house during a party, may be necessary. Sometimes, boarding a pet in a kennel may be the safest alternative.

Cleaning products such as disinfectants get a lot of use during the holidays as we spiff up our homes for visitors. Remember, many of these products can be toxic to your pets.

When inviting visitors, make sure they know you have a pet. If these people have allergies, you could help them by using a product such as Allerpet to decrease the dander in the house.



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If you are traveling during the holidays, and need to leave your pet(s) at home, start to make accommodations for your pet(s) early. Many boarding facilities fill up very fast. Responsible pet sitters are a good alternative. If they are unfamiliar with your house or pet(s) have them come over and get acquainted before you leave.

New Pets

New pets are not good holiday gifts. If someone is thinking about getting a new pet, give the new prospective owner a variety of cat toys, food, or books on cat care. You may also wish to give a gift certificate so the person can choose his or her own pet after the holidays.

Similarly, if thinking about getting a new pet for yourself, remember, pets need routine and a time to bond with you. With its noise, commotion, and special hazards, the holiday season is anything but routine. Think about getting your new pet after the holidays. We guarantee you will not have an after-holiday let down!

Why not make the holidays more enjoyable for homeless pets? Contact your local animal shelter to see if you can donate food, kitty litter, toys, or time.

Pet Gifts and Treats

When choosing a holiday gift for your special friend, be sure it is safe – no small pieces that could come off and be swallowed. Choose healthy holiday treats for your cat and give them in moderation.

With all of the festivities, do not forget to relax and spend some quality time with your pet. Your cat will think that is the best gift of all.

Now that you have read this article, would you like to test your knowledge of holiday hazards? If so, click ? for the quiz.

Holidays are a time to be joyful and thankful. We hope all of yours are beautiful.



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