

Dangerous Foods: Are They Harmful to Your Cat?

By: Dr. Dawn Ruben

Americans spend over \$10 billion dollars on pet food for our pets. Despite buying the best food available, some pets would rather eat what we eat. However, certain foods can be dangerous to your pet causing varying degrees of illness. Some food is toxic due to ingredients and some by improper cooking, storage or poor hygiene.

Alcoholic Beverages. Ethanol is the component in alcoholic beverages that can be toxic when an excessive amount is ingested. Pets are much smaller than us and can be highly affected by small amounts of alcohol. Exercise caution when drinks and pets are together. Toxicity can cause a wide variety of signs, and may even cause death. Signs can include odor of alcohol on the animal's breath, staggering, behavioral changes, excitement, depression, increased urination, slowed respiratory rate or cardiac arrest and death.

Apples, Apricots, Cherries, Peaches and Plums. Ingestion of large amounts of stems, seeds and leaves of these fruits can be toxic. They contain a cyanide type compound and signs of toxicity include apprehension, dilated pupils, difficulty breathing, hyperventilation and shock.

Avocados. The leaves, fruit, bark and seeds of avocados have all been reported to be toxic. The toxic component in the avocado is "persin," which is a fatty acid derivative. Symptoms of toxicity include difficulty breathing, abdominal enlargement, abnormal fluid accumulations in the chest, abdomen and sac around the heart. The amount that needs to be ingested to cause signs is unknown. Do not feed your pet any component of the avocado.

Baking Powder and Baking Soda. Baking soda and baking powder are both leavening agents. A leavening agent is a common ingredient in baked goods that produces a gas causing batter and dough to rise. Baking soda is simply sodium bicarbonate. Baking powder actually consists of baking soda and an acid, usually cream of tartar, calcium acid phosphate, sodium aluminum sulfate or a mixture of the three. Ingestion of large amounts of baking soda or baking powder can lead to electrolyte abnormalities (low potassium, low calcium and/or high sodium), congestive heart failure or muscle spasms.

Chocolate. Chocolate, in addition to having a high fat content, contains caffeine and theobromine. These two compounds are nervous system stimulants and can be toxic to your dog in high amounts. The levels of caffeine and theobromine vary between different types of chocolate. For example, white chocolate has the lowest concentration of stimulants and baking chocolate or cacao beans have the highest concentration.

Depending on the type of chocolate ingested and the amount eaten, various problems can occur. The high fat content in chocolate may result in vomiting and possibly diarrhea. Once toxic levels are eaten, the stimulant effect becomes apparent. You may notice restlessness, hyperactivity, muscle twitching, increased urination and possibly excessive panting. Heart rate and blood pressure levels may also be increased. Seizure activity may occur in severe cases.

Coffee (grounds and beans). Dogs that eat coffee grounds or beans can get "caffeine" toxicity. The symptoms are very similar to those of chocolate toxicity and can be just as or even more serious.

Fatty Foods. Rich and fatty food are favorites of dogs. They often get them as treats, leftovers or from getting into the trash. These fatty foods can cause pancreatitis. Pancreatitis can affect any pet but miniature or toy poodles, cocker spaniels and miniature schnauzers are particularly prone. Signs of pancreatitis generally include an acute onset of vomiting, sometimes diarrhea and abdominal pain. Abdominal pain is often evidenced by hunched posture or "splinting" of the abdomen when picked up. The dog may become very sick quickly and often needs intensive fluid and antibiotic therapy.

Dairy Products. Dairy products are not highly dangerous but can pose problems for two reasons. One is their high fat content and like other foods with high fat content, there is a risk of pancreatitis. The second reason is that pets poorly digest dairy products since they lack the enzyme required to digest lactose. This affects some pets more than others causing gas to diarrhea. Small amounts of plain yogurt or cheese are tolerated by most dogs but it is probably safest to avoid dairy products altogether.

Grapes and Raisins. So far, about 10 dogs poisoned by grapes and raisins have been officially reported to the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center. The amount of grapes or raisins ingested has been between 9 ounces to 2 pounds, and dogs ingesting these large amounts have developed kidney

failure. Aggressive, and sometimes prolonged, treatment may be necessary to give the affected dog a chance at survival; without treatment death is possible. Despite testing, the reason for the kidney failure and the amount necessary for toxicity remains unknown. For now, any dog that ingests large amounts of grapes or raisins should be treated aggressively, so contact your veterinarian immediately if ingestion has occurred.

Macadamia Nuts. Macadamia nuts, also called the Queensland nut or Australia nut, can be toxic. The mechanism behind why these nuts are toxic is a mystery. However, it has been noted that as few as six to forty nuts in dogs have caused severe toxic signs. Dogs develop weakness, depression, vomiting, difficulty walking, tremors, abdominal pain, lameness, stiffness and/or pale gums. The signs usually dissipate in 12 to 24 hrs.

Moldy or Spoiled Food. Dogs love to get into the trash. A medical problem arises when the trash contains moldy or spoiled food. In addition to food poisoning, some pets can develop tremors related to the ingestion of certain molds.

Nutmeg. You may not realized this but high levels of nutmeg can be toxic, even fatal. The toxic principle is not well understood. Signs of toxicity include tremors, seizures, nervous system abnormalities or death.

Onions or Garlic. Dogs and cats lack the enzyme necessary to properly digest onions and this could result in gas, vomiting, diarrhea or severe gastrointestinal distress. If large amounts of onion or garlic are ingested or onions are a daily part of your dog's diet, the red blood cells may become fragile and break apart. This is due to the toxic ingredient in onions and garlic, thiosulphate. Signs can begin immediately after eating the onion or a few days later. Large quantities of garlic need to be ingested before signs of toxicity are seen. Severe anemias and even death can occur if the dog ingests lots of onions or garlic and receives no treatment.

All forms of onion and garlic are a problem. This includes raw, dehydrated, cooked, powders or those in foods. The most common source of onions for cats is in human baby food. Some baby foods have onion powder added for taste. When consistently fed baby food with added onion powder, signs of toxicity can develop. Many people use garlic pills as 'natural' flea control. The amount of garlic is low but if large amounts of the pills are ingested at one time, toxicity may occur.

Yeast Dough. When ingested, bread or yeast dough will "rise" in the stomach just as it would for bread. As the dough rises and ferments, alcohol is produced. There are two problems with yeast dough. The biggest problem is that the dough often rises to many times its size, expanding the pet's stomach. The second problem is from the alcohol component, which can cause "alcohol toxicity." Symptoms of vomiting, retching, abdominal discomfort, lethargy, depression or bloat is possible.