Chocolate poisoning

Overview

Chocolate contains a substance called ‘theobromine’ which is toxic to dogs and cats. It’s similar to caffeine and can cause problems with the nervous system, bowels, kidneys and heart.

The darker the chocolate, the more dangerous it is:

- Dark chocolate, cocoa powder, cocoa butter and cocoa beans contain the most theobromine and are very toxic.
- Milk chocolate contains a moderate amount of theobromine so the danger level depends on how much your dog eats.
- White chocolate contains very little theobromine and is a lot less toxic.

Call your vet immediately if you suspect that your dog or cat has eaten chocolate, regardless of the type. Keep the packaging at hand so the ingredients can be checked.

The more cocoa solids a chocolate item has the more toxic it is for your pet.
Why is chocolate poisonous to pets?

Chocolate contains a substance called theobromine which is toxic to cats and dogs. It causes problems with the nervous system, bowels, kidneys and heart. Chocolate poisoning can lead to seizures, heart failure and possibly even death.

Symptoms

Symptoms usually take 2-4 hours to appear, but can take as long as 24 hours. The first signs of poisoning may include:

- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting
- Drinking more than usual
- Peeing more than usual
- Being unusually excited and restless
- Painful belly

Signs of poisoning may then progress to:

- Fast breathing or panting
- Shaking or trembling
- High temperature (fever)
- Seizures
- A fast heartbeat
- In the worst cases, chocolate poisoning can lead to heart failure, coma and even death.

When to contact your vet

Without delay, call your vet or ‘Animal Poison Line’ if you suspect your pet may have eaten chocolate. Let them know how much, what type and what time your pet ate the chocolate.
Keep any packaging to hand – it will contain useful information. You may be advised to take your pet in for assessment and possible treatment by your vet.

Animal Poison Line is run by veterinary poison specialists. They are available 24/7 and all calls cost £30.

**Treatment**

Chocolate poisoning can be fatal if a large amount is eaten and treatment isn’t sought quickly. Your vet will probably be able to tell whether your pet is at risk based on what they have eaten. The aim of treatment is to prevent your pet from absorbing theobromine (the toxic part of chocolate).

The following treatments may be suggested:

**Vomiting**
- Your vet may give your pet an injection to make them sick.
- Ideally, this is as soon as possible after eating chocolate.

**Activated charcoal**
- Activated charcoal is a black powder that traps toxins and stops them from being absorbed by the body. It’s usually mixed with water and given in food or straight into their mouth with a syringe.
- Your vet may prescribe activated charcoal for you to feed to your pet for 2-3 days.

**A drip**
- A drip puts fluids directly into a vein and helps the body flush out toxins in their urine.
- If your vet is concerned about your pet’s condition, they may decide to keep them on a drip in the veterinary hospital for monitoring.
Outlook

If they are treated quickly, the outlook is good and your pet is likely to make a full recovery.

Cost

What an expensive snack! Treatment for chocolate poisoning can cost hundreds of pounds (this varies depending on the treatment needed).

Always speak to your vet if you can’t afford the treatment they have recommended, there may be other options.

If you are struggling with veterinary fees, PDSA offers free or reduced cost treatment to eligible clients. We strongly recommend insuring your pet as soon as you get them so that you are covered for any problems. Always check what level of cover you have and whether it is a ‘lifelong’ policy.

Prevention

Do not feed your cat or dog chocolate and make sure to keep it out of reach. Make sure any children in the house know not to feed your pet chocolate. Store chocolate in high or locked cupboards and don’t leave it where they might sniff it out!

Make sure to be particularly careful around Easter, Christmas and other events when there is likely to be more chocolate in the house than usual.

Don’t use cocoa shell mulches on your garden borders if you have a pet that goes outside.

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