Poisonous Foods to Dogs and Cats

The bond that develops between pet owners and their pets is often extremely strong, which means that as pet owners we often like to share with our pet all of the things that we ourselves enjoy in life, including food. However, there are a couple of reasons that you should always be very careful when considering sharing special treats with your pet. The first reason is that the food you want to share may not be a particularly healthy food item and therefore you should think twice about allowing your pet to acquire a taste for something they shouldn't have. Some food items may not be detrimental right away because they require a higher dose to be ingested or because they are cumulative in their actions i.e. the animal needs to ingest a certain amount of the toxic principle (poison) over a certain period of time in order for the effect to take place. Secondly and most importantly, although you may very well enjoy a particular food yourself, it might actually be very poisonous for your pet.

The following is a list of foods that your pet should avoid as they are all poisonous to some degree:

POISONOUS FRUITS

Apples: Apple seeds contain cyanide compounds capable of poisoning a pet dog or cat if swallowed or chewed. Cyanide prevents blood from delivering oxygen to bodily tissues, causing suffocation. Indicators of problems in a pet suspected of eating cyanide-harbouring pits, stems or leaves include the development of bright red mucous membranes, enlarged pupils, respiratory distress, fear or nervousness, and signs of shock. The condition can be fatal if untreated.

Apricots: Apricot pits and the stems and leaves of its fruit-producing tree contain the poison cyanide, a potentially fatal toxin to dogs and cats. Symptoms are the same as that for apple seed ingestion (see above). Swallowed whole, pits can also result in a bowel obstruction or blockage, possibly requiring corrective surgery.

Avocado: Persin, a potentially toxic substance with a fatty acid type structure, is present not just in the avocado pit and surrounding fruit, but in the plant leaves and bark as well. Although harmless to humans unless someone has a persin allergy and, in fact, thought to be beneficial to women suffering from breast cancer, persin (and therefore avocados) can be fatal when ingested by domestic pets. Dogs and cats may be lucky and not have any negative symptoms if given the green fruit; others may vomit, develop diarrhoea, or a combination of both. However, for some, reactions are much more severe.

Along with other pets, such as rabbits, goats, cattle, sheep, horses, birds and fish, certain dogs and cats experience heart problems, respiratory complications, and ultimately death after ingesting persin-containing foods. Symptoms of severe reactions include laboured breathing, swelling of the abdomen, and fluid build-up in the chest, abdomen, or area surrounding the heart.

Cherries: The cherry pit, like that of the apricot, peach, pear, and plum, contains a form of cyanide. Swallowed whole, intestinal problems may result; swallowed and partially to fully chewed pits can fatally poison dogs and cats.

Citrus: Oranges, lemons, and limes can lead to vomiting and diarrhoea in dogs. Eating grapefruit has the same laxative effect, but is accompanied by the symptoms of light sensitivity and depression. Cats have identical negative effects upon ingesting grapefruit.

Currants: Cats fed currants can experience kidney damage due to some unknown, yet potent, toxin contained in the berry.

Grapes/Raisins: Responsible for the deaths of several dogs, grapes and/or raisins in as little as 250 gram quantities have proven lethal. Slightly more fortunate animals may experience kidney damage, requiring emergency medical care, but ultimately surviving. A few very lucky dogs may have no symptoms at all, but since the reason why grapes in their various forms (fresh, dried, fermented) are fatal to some is yet unknown, caution must be taken even if an animal has eaten grapes in the past without incident. This is because toxins may be capable of building up over time and reaching dangerous levels only gradually; a small grape-containing snack here and there may not be problematic on its own, but in combination may prove lethal.

If dogs eat large amounts of grapes or raisins, it is recommended that they are induced to vomit, have their stomachs pumped, and are given activated charcoal and intravenous fluids.

Like dogs, cats can be asymptomatic or else can experience serious kidney damage if fed raisins or grapes.

Peaches: The pit of the peach contains cyanide, which is poisonous to dogs and cats. Symptoms of poisoning are the same as those after eating apple seeds (see above). Peach pits may be doubly problematic and create an intestinal blockage if eaten or swallowed.

Plums: Plum pits are cyanide-containing, as well as potential hazard if they become lodged in the intestines of dogs or cats. Symptoms of poisoning are the same as those after eating apple seeds (see above).

Rhubarb: Oxalates present in the leaves of the rhubarb plants have negative effects on the nervous, digestive, and urinary systems of dogs and cats.

POISONOUS VEGETABLES/HERBS

Broccoli: Death by broccoli has been seen in different livestock breeds if it comprises more than 25% of the diet; gastrointestinal complications occur when it comprises more than 10%. The problematic substance in broccoli, isothiocyanate, is considered a strong irritant of the digestive system. Various forms of preparation and cooking and their respective effects have not been evaluated.

Chives: Chives contain disulfides, as do garlic and onions, damaging the red blood cells of cats and dogs. However, onions are more problematic, as they have a much higher disulfide concentration, followed by garlic, and lastly, chives.

Garlic: The sulfoxides and disulfides contained in garlic, whether fresh, cooked, or powdered can harm red blood cells and cause anaemia in both dogs and cats. Clinical signs of anaemia include light-coloured (pale) gums and lethargy.

Mushrooms: Mushrooms come in many varieties; some are highly toxic, while others are harmless. Unless an owner is a mushroom expert and can tell the difference, a dog that has been suspected of eating mushrooms should be watched closely. (Mushrooms that sprout in backyards are usually toxic).

To be safe, it is recommended that the dog is induced to vomit and given activated charcoal if the mushroom is not expelled in its entirety. The wrong mushroom types can cause jaundice and liver damage, leading to internal bleeding or seizures, or can have hallucinogenic effects resulting in tremors, seizures, and coma.

If a dog vomits on its own or develops diarrhoea but lacks other symptoms, likely no serious harm has been done; however, if gastrointestinal upset is accompanied by excess saliva or tears, reduced pupil size, slowed heartbeat, depressed activity or lethargy, restlessness, staggering, or a comatose and unresponsive pet, medical care is mandatory.

Although cats are less likely to eat mushrooms, they have been shown to be attracted to two poisonous varieties that can kill: the *Amanita muscaria* and the *Amanita pantherina*. In contrast, dogs are attracted to seven poisonous varieties. One, the Scleroderma species, is also fatal to pigs.

Onions: Although believed to be safe in small amounts, onions in quantities of a cup or more cause haemolytic anaemia in dogs. This is because the disulphides contained in onion damage red blood cells. All forms of onion are dangerous, whether fresh, cooked, or dehydrated. Cats are more sensitive than dogs to onions and can likely tolerate less. Clinical signs of onion poisoning include pale, light-coloured gums and lethargy.

Potatoes: Raw potatoes are laced with glycoalkanoid solamine, a substance that is poisonous to cats. Cooked potatoes do not seem to create any ill effects, but raw potatoes and the stems and leaves of its plant can cause gastrointestinal irritation, bloody stools, lethargy, shaking, paralysis, and heart attack.

Tomatoes: Tomatoes, as well as the stems and leaves, are poisonous to cats. A single small tomato has been shown to cause serious gastric and intestinal reactions.

POISONOUS NUTS AND SEEDS

Almonds: The gastrointestinal system of a dog or cat often finds almonds difficult to digest, which can lead to vomiting and other symptoms of irritation. Salted nuts can lead to electrolyte imbalances if eaten in high enough quantities, and may even pose a choking hazard if not chewed before swallowed.

Chocolate/Cocoa: Half of all dogs find a chocolate dose of 100mg/kg of body weight lethal. However, lower amounts (as low as 10% of this lethal dose) can cause various levels of poisoning with symptoms such as excited behaviour, twitching, frequent urination, and an elevated pulse. In some of these cases, resulting heart problems may prove fatal.

The problematic substance in chocolate is theobromine, which is lowest in milk chocolate, higher in semi-sweet varieties, and highest in bitter or baking chocolates. White chocolate has only trace amounts of theobromine and therefore is not considered a potential poison. However, although white and milk chocolates are the least problematic as far as causing theobromine toxicity, they contain the highest amounts of fat and can cause pancreatitis or enteritis if consumed in large amounts or on a frequent basis. These conditions are life-threatening if untreated.

Cats, like dogs, are also unable to properly process theobromine and can experience seizures, coma, and death after consumption of chocolate.

Coffee: Because coffee contains the stimulant caffeine, animals ingesting it may experience overexcited nervous systems. The lethal amount of caffeine for both dogs and cats is 150 mg/kg body weight. Dogs may react after coffee consumption with increased breathing and heart rates, shaking, and muscle twitching. Cats consuming caffeine often experience diarrhoea and vomiting, a fast heartbeat, and shake uncontrollably, seize and collapse.

Macadamia nuts: Containing more monounsaturated fats than any other seed, macadamia nuts are hard for dogs and cats to digest and can result in problems with the gastrointestinal tract, and in time, lead to pancreatitis. An unidentified component, as yet, in the macadamia nut causes dogs additional complications as well. As early as 3 to 6 hours after devouring macadamia nuts, this substance brings about drowsiness and a spike in temperature to accompany stomach upset. Neurological symptoms usually appear within 12 hours, and dogs will show difficulty moving their hind limbs or standing. Most pets recover fully on their own within 24 hours of exposure, but for dogs that recently consumed large quantities of the nut, especially nuts dipped in chocolate, inducing vomiting to limit adverse reactions is recommended. Cats are also poisoned by this unidentified component in macadamia nuts and have digestive, muscular, and nervous system complications upon eating them.

Mustard seeds: After eating mustard plant parts, susceptible animals may develop oral irritation, sensitivity to light, laboured breathing, and gastrointestinal upset. Problems become more severe depending on the quantity ingested. No antidote exists, so animals displaying symptoms should be given medical treatment.

Pecan nuts: Dogs given pecans as a snack can end up with gastrointestinal upset or an obstruction. When mouldy, pecans cause various neurological symptoms possibly due to the fungi associated with the mould or a combination between fungal elements (mycotoxins) and/or the juglone toxin within the nuts. Juglone toxin containing nuts have also been associated to laminitis in horses.

Pistachios: High in fat, these nuts can cause stomach upset and eventually lead to pancreatitis in dogs and cats.

Walnuts: Black walnuts and English walnuts can lead to gastrointestinal problems or a possible intestinal obstruction in dogs; mouldy black, English, or Japanese walnuts have strong mycotoxins that cause seizures or other neurological abnormalities.

POISONOUS MEATS AND ANIMAL PRODUCTS

Bones: Although not poisonous, a snack of bones is not without potential hazards. Bones can adhere to the mouth, the throat, or intestines and can splinter and create internal damage or blockages in dogs and cats.

Fat: A high-fat diet is difficult for the cat or dog system to process and can lead to both obesity and pancreatitis.

Liver: Large amounts of liver in a dog or cat's diet can create toxic levels of vitamin A. This has a negative effect on bones and may cause deformities, growths, or osteoporosis in cats. In dogs symptoms of toxicity include a calcified skeleton and diseased skin. In some cases, toxic vitamin A levels are fatal.

Lunch meats: High in both fat and salt, a diet rich in lunch meats can lead to pancreatitis in a dog or cat. The high nitrate content in deli meats is also unhealthy.

Milk & Dairy: Certain dogs and cats, usually older animals, are unable to process milk products and develop diarrhoea after their consumption.

Tuna: If fed any type of fish in large enough quantities dogs develop a deficiency in thiamine. Thiamine deficiencies cause anorexia, seizures, and death. Believe it or not, feeding large amounts of canned tuna to a cat can have undesirable effects as well. This is because it creates an imbalance of nutrients and may also lead to a thiamine deficiency or mercury poisoning.

Raw eggs: Eating uncooked eggs can result in unhealthy skin and coats due to the avidin enzyme. This enzyme inhibits the proper absorption of biotin in dogs and cats. In addition to avidin-related problems, eggs may be contaminated with bacteria and lead to food poisoning.

Raw fish: Raw, uncooked salmon can be infested with flukes that carry infectious organisms known as "rickettsia". These organisms are released in a dog's intestines and cause fevers within 24 hours, combined with a lack of energy and reduced appetite. Four days after consumption vomiting occurs, followed by bloody, loose stool. Fatality rates are as high as ninety percent; hydrating treatments and antibiotics are necessary for survival in most affected pets.

Raw fish, similarly to canned tuna, if fed in too high amounts to a cat cause a thiamine deficiency. Cats are not susceptible to rickettsial infection via salmon consumption.

Undercooked meat: Improperly cooked meat of all kinds may be contaminated with bacteria, leading to gastrointestinal upset in dogs and cats.

POISONOUS CONDIMENTS AND ADDITIVES

Nutmeg: Excessive nutmeg consumption can create serious problems for dogs resulting in seizures, tremors, or death.

Salt: Large quantities of salt dehydrate a pet cat or dog and lead to a sodium ion imbalance. If an animal develops extreme thirst, vomits, or becomes lethargic following substantial salt consumption it may indicate kidney damage. Left untreated a pet can develop seizures or fall into a coma and die.

Sugar: Large amounts of sugar result in overweight pets (cats and dogs) with poor dental health and an increased risk of developing diabetes mellitus.

Sugarless xylitol candy: Not just present in candy, xylitol is found in sugarless chewy vitamins, baked goods, and gums as well. One or two sticks of gum can kill a small dog; three or more sticks can kill a 30 kg pet. Cats are similarly susceptible to xylitol toxicity.

Xylitol causes peaks in insulin and dips in blood sugar, creating a lethargic dog or cat that is unable to retain its balance. If untreated, brain damage, liver failure, or blood disorders develop and can lead to coma, seizures, and death.

Yeast dough: The alcohol present in yeast is absorbed into the bloodstream, resulting in alcohol poisoning. Signs a cat or dog has been poisoned include panting, vomiting, and drooling, followed by coma and eventually death. A pet may be saved from the full effects of this by being induced to vomit and receiving activated charcoal and intravenous fluids. In addition to alcohol poisoning, the dough also causes problems when it expands and creates gases within the warm, moist environment of the body. This leads to gastric or intestinal rupture in dogs or cats.