

Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors

Promoting the Best in Pet Behaviour



A Merry (problem-behaviour-free) Christmas!

On behalf of everyone in the APBC, our Vet Newsletter team would like to wish you all a Merry, behaviour problem free Christmas, and a Happy New Year. Don't forget to send us ideas for articles to include in future newsletters. Please email any suggestions or contributions to info@apbc.org.uk

Don't Forget the Dangers for our Pets at Christmas Time.

Christmas time for us humans can be a time for laughter, relaxing and partying, with lots of food and drink around, but for our animals, it can be a stressful time, or a time where exposure to potential hazards increases.

Food

Mince Pies, Alcohol, Christmas Cake and Christmas Pudding

Dried fruits make up a large amount of the ingredients of most Christmas cakes; currants, raisins and sultanas are very dangerous to cats and dogs. Ingestion may result in toxicity which leads to renal failure and intensive emergency treatment is often required. Unfortunately, the amount that has to be eaten to cause harm varies greatly between individuals. Whilst one pet could eat a whole piece of cake and be fine, another could become seriously ill after only a small amount. Current specialist advice is that a vet should be contacted if ANY raisins or sultanas are eaten.



Chocolate

Chocolate can be very dangerous to our pets. The theobromine, which is derived from the cacao plant, found in cocoa powder is toxic. Advent calendars, chocolate decorations on the tree and chocolates left out for visitors are all potential hazards for our pets. Ideally owners should try to make sure it is kept out of the way of inquisitive noses, and pets should not be left unsupervised near chocolate. Possible clinical signs of theobromine toxicity in dogs and cats include gastrointestinal issues, such as vomiting and diarrhoea, an increased thirst, hyperactive or restless behaviour, panting and a racing heart rate (tachycardia). In more severe cases it can lead to muscle tremors, seizures and even death. It is advised for owners to seek veterinary advice immediately if there is a suspected ingestion, as prompt action can make a huge difference to how significantly the pet is affected.



Xylitol

People are becoming more aware of the risks of xylitol toxicity in dogs. It is a common ingredient in many well-known brands of chewing gum. Xylitol is an artificial sweetener and is often used as a sugar substitute in many products such as baked goods, chewable vitamin supplements, toothpaste and peanut butter. Xylitol is dangerous in dogs if it is ingested as it stimulates insulin release in the body and consequently can lead to hypoglycaemia. It doesn't have this effect on humans but in dogs, clinical signs can occur in as little as 30 minutes after ingestion and include vomiting, lethargy, weakness, liver failure and seizures. It is vital that the owner seeks veterinary attention as soon as possible if there is a risk that their dog has ingested it.



Noises

Parties, visitors, excited children, loud noises like crackers and fireworks are all changes in routine and can be alarming for animals, indoors and outdoors. *There is a previous newsletter on fireworks already for more information but please be aware of these during the festive season.* It is extremely important at times like these, to ensure that owners are taught how to provide a safe haven for their animals to be available at all times throughout the year. This takes preparation and practice in advance before the parties start. If the animals have been taught how to enjoy being in a safe haven, and have a safe haven available, they have choice to remain in the busy area or remove themselves to their safe area. They may choose to remove themselves from the party and noise, and people, especially children, must not follow them or corner them in their safe places.

Providing Kongs or other high-value food toys may help guide, distract and reward the animal for going to the safe haven, helping to maintain a positive emotional state. If this has been associated with visitors before, then it may become a paired association, where the animal learns that when visitors are in the home, the animal receives high value rewards, and therefore is much more likely to associate visitors with positive events. It is important to ensure they are as comfortable as possible

before visitors arrive, for example, if it is a **dog**, ensure they have been walked/exercised, have been to the toilet, and are calm already before it gets busy. If it is a **cat**, guarantee they have easy access to their resources, including a latrine ensuring they do not have to enter the busy area to access it. Usually bedding or resting areas placed up high allow cats to feel more secure and safe, as they provide a vantage point where the cat can view what is going on around them but will feel less threatened by it. Ideally, especially if the animals are young, the owners can ensure that they have been played with and have then calmed down and are as relaxed as can be, before the event. If an animal has learned that it can go to its safe haven whenever it wants to and that positive things happen during these times, then it is much more likely to be able to cope with the noises and hustle and bustle that come with Christmas.

Creating a safe haven for a dog

Main aims:

- o Pleasant associations therefore creating a more positive emotional state
- o Is not disturbed when in the safe haven, so can relax

Pick a place that will be the safe haven, usually preferred out of the way in a corner, under shelves or under the stairs. A crate may create a secure feeling, a blanket can always be placed over the top of it for added security

Teach the dog that this place is a good place, where good things happen, for example treats, being fed, or relaxation

Make the safe haven very comfortable, place a soft, comfortable bed or duvet there, include a water bowl, and make sure it is placed out of draughts or heavy through-traffic

Create an area like this for each dog if there is more than one dog in the household.

Ensure the dog is never sent there as a punishment and never confined there, at least until it is fully comfortable with the area

People, children and other animals should not go to or get into the safe haven, equally, the dog should not be pulled or physically forced out of the safe haven.

The dog can be asked to come out for a reward, but if it chooses to remain there, then it should be left there.

Adjunctive aid

Kongs, food-filled with a mixture of kibble, pastes and high value treats, food puzzles and hiding treats within the safe haven so the animal finds them will help to create a positive association with the area.

Consider leaving the Radio on a soothing channel to help reduce environmental noise and provide a calming feeling

Pheromonatherapy – Adaptil plugged in for dogs, Feliway plugged in for cats

Set them up to succeed

This is an extremely important step for a successful Christmas. Setting the animal up to succeed, for example, if they are dogs or cats, then if owners teach and practice the behaviours and the use of the safe haven beforehand, it is much more likely to be used as a safe haven at times of need.

If there are fireworks or loud outdoor parties and we are considering animals that live outdoors, for example horses, then certain species-specific aspects must be considered. Horses are a herd-living species and often need to be in the company of other horses to be able to cope with scary situations. This may be either when in stables, or when out in the field, if the individuals value company (which most horses do) but are kept alone during a stressful time, this will cause even more distress, and potential harm, to those animals. If they are kept out in the field, ensure they have company if possible, that there is a field shelter (natural or made) and that there is hay on offer. The hay (or grass if there is still enough grass during the winter) encourages chewing, which facilitates a calm, relaxed, positive emotional state in grazing animals such as horses, which predisposes them to be able to cope with these situations. The same applies to Rabbits and Guinea-pigs, they are social, group-living species and find security and comfort being with conspecifics.





Cold weather

Frost

As the weather gets colder, frozen water can pose a real danger. Beware of frozen lakes and ponds. If a dog does get stuck in or under ice, please advise owners to try not to go in after them but to seek assistance as quickly as possible to get them out. Then, ensure they have a thorough check over by a veterinary surgeon to check for wounds and signs of hypothermia.

Frozen water bowls and troughs can be a danger to outdoor-living animals, such as horses, goats, sheep, pigs, birds, rabbits and guinea pigs. Near-freezing water can be a shock to their stomachs and may even slow down their digestive tracts leading to ileus or gut stasis, which is extremely dangerous. In freezing weather, owners should be monitoring their animals closely and ensuring they provide fresh water 2-4 times daily. If the animal appears to have a reduced appetite, not passing many droppings, or is suddenly a lot quieter than normal, the owner should contact a vet immediately.

Many of these prey species will not display how they are feeling until it is quite advanced, so once these signs are noticed, these animals can deteriorate very quickly. These weather conditions are when horses are more likely to experience colic (abdominal pain), from either a reduced water intake leading to impactions, from drinking freezing cold water and shocking their system or from an abrupt change in their diet due to limited availability of grass, causing spasmodic colic. Another consideration for animals living outside is Frostbite. Over the winter, pets

exposed to extremely low temperatures may be at risk of developing frostbite; especially on the extremities such as the nose, ears and feet. This may not only lead to painful and sore skin, but also be followed by hypothermia and fatalities. Signs of frostbite include pale or blue-white tinged skin which is cold to touch, as well as appearing painful. If an animal is suffering with frostbite, it is important not to warm the affected area of skin too rapidly or too much; instead use a more gentle indirect approach such as a warmed towel or tepid water.



Anti-freeze

Anti-freeze is one of the most common toxicities seen in veterinary practices over the winter period. It is frequently used as a de-icer for cars and often contains the highly toxic ingredient 'Ethylene Glycol'. Animals are most likely exposed to anti-freeze due to leaky bottles left in garages, or drips from a car, or spilled anti-freeze. It can be appealing to cats and dogs as the anti-freeze liquid has a very sweet taste, or if cats walk through a puddle of it unintentionally, they are likely to lick it off when grooming. Other points of exposure may be outdoor water features, where people may add anti-freeze to the flowing water in the winter months to prevent it from freezing. Many animals appear to enjoy drinking from running water, so this is something for owners to be vigilant about.

The consequences of antifreeze/ethylene glycol toxicity are often very severe with even small quantities resulting in acute renal failure. Clinical signs such as sudden disorientation, increased thirst, pale gums, dehydration, weakness and collapse could be a result of antifreeze toxicity.



Parked cars and warm engines

Parked cars, especially those with recently warmed engines, can be a hidden danger for inquisitive cats. They can be found under a wheel arch or bonnet seeking somewhere warm away from the harsh winter weather. Ensure owners are aware of this when getting in their car, especially if the engine is still warm from a previous outing! Nasty burns, skin trauma and even fatalities can occur if cats get trapped.



Other potential hazards

Trees – whether real or artificial, are extremely attractive and the perfect climbing frame for small pets, especially kittens! Ensure the tree is secured in its base and is stable so that it cannot be knocked over easily. Ensure, if the animals are showing interest in it, that they are not left unsupervised with the tree. Baby gates or puppy pens can be useful to keep the animals away from the base of the tree.

Pine needles – It is recommended to vacuum or sweep around the tree regularly to clear up fallen needles, watering the tree regularly will help to reduce needle drop. Pine needles, if ingested, can cause gastrointestinal upset in pets, as well as getting stuck in their fur, skin and ears, potentially causing foreign body issues. If

any plant feed additives are being added to the tree water, these can be harmful to pets, so ensure they cannot ingest the water.



Festive Flowers

Lilies and Poinsettia are some of the traditional plants of the festive season. If animals are exposed to, or brush past, the pollen or stoma of the lily, they may ingest it by cleaning their fur, and this can cause renal toxicity. This is more common in cats. This can be fatal and requires immediate veterinary attention. If ingested, the poinsettia plant, especially the sap, can cause irritation to the mouth and signs such as vomiting and diarrhoea. These injuries may not require intensive hospital treatment but analgesia and a thorough check over is highly recommended



Decorations

Tinsel - can be very attractive to animals, especially cats! They can be either chewed up or ingested, and have a danger of causing an obstruction. This may be in the form of a linear foreign body, where a long, thin piece of string, elastic or other similar material becomes lodged in the gastrointestinal tract. As the material is so thin, it often passes through with food but dangerously can become anchored and stuck on the way, sometimes around the base of the tongue, sometimes in the stomach. The rest of the length of material then follows through the intestines but

because it cannot move freely, the intestines become bunched in a concertina effect, restricting vital blood flow and compromising intestinal tissues. Surgery is often the only option to remove it, sometimes along with sections of intestine, depending upon the damage.

Baubles – These shiny balls can be very attractive to animals, including cats to scoot across the floor, or dogs to try and play with, mistaking them for a normal ball. Baubles can cause all sorts of problems; glass baubles can break and shatter posing the risk of wounds or small shattered pieces embedding in paws, causing splinters and possibly glass ingestion. The tops, ribbon and hooks of baubles can easily become detached and ingested causing foreign bodies. It may be safest to place baubles slightly higher up on the tree, away from the lower branches so that they cannot be played with



Wrapping paper

The tradition of wrapping presents and adorning them with bows and ribbons is beautiful, but does pose yet another risk to pets. These sorts of materials are extremely attractive to dogs, cats, birds and rabbits, especially young animals, and can be easily ingested. This will likely cause the same gastrointestinal issues with linear foreign bodies as described with tinsel.



