

Seasonal Hazards for Christmas Canines

By John Whitaker BVMS, MRCVS

In this article I thought I would illustrate some of the problems that we see in our surgeries at this time of the year so that you might be able to avoid an expensive visit to your vet over the festive season!

One popular condition that we see on Christmas Eve particularly is chocolate poisoning.

The decorations have all been put up and the tree beautifully adorned. All the family presents have been spread out on the floor underneath ready to be opened the next morning. Everyone is busy in the kitchen preparing for tomorrow's gastronomic marathon. Everyone, that is, except your little four footed fiend (yes, the omission of the r is intentional), who has sneaked back into the living room to investigate these interesting looking parcels under the tree, one of which, if his nose is not mistaken, definitely contains chocolate under that festive wrapping paper so lovingly applied, way back last September, by your doting Aunt Cecily.

“Well, lets have a look, shall we? Yes it is chocolate, and yes, I think I can polish them off before I am discovered. There, no problem!”

Now dogs can eat up to 9 grams of milk chocolate per kilogram of bodyweight before signs of poisoning will appear, but only 1.25 gm of plain chocolate. What the equivalent figures are for humans I am not going to reveal as I do not wish to be held responsible for any outbreaks of chocolate abuse which may subsequently occur amongst the readership. However, you can work out from this that plain chocolate is 7 times more toxic to dogs than milk chocolate, so let us hope that Aunt Cecily opted for the latter in her present selection.

If your dog's misdemeanor is discovered shortly after the occurrence or within 30 minutes, it is worthwhile trying to make him vomit. A single lump of washing soda pushed down his throat is guaranteed to have spectacular results in an amazingly short time, so get him outside quickly unless you want him to throw up all over the rest of the presents.

If, however the deed has been done more than 30 minutes previously (whilst you were at midnight mass is another favourite time) it is probably not worth trying to make him vomit so you should watch for signs of toxicity which can take up to 10 hours to manifest themselves.

The toxic agent in chocolate is theobromine. Signs of theobromine poisoning include excitability (who isn't on Christmas Eve?) and convulsive spasms which can progress to seizures or fits. It also acts on the heart muscle causing an increase in the heart rate, rapid respiration and panting. Ultimately these symptoms could lead to heart failure and death in dogs which are older or have pre-existing heart problems or ingest huge amounts.

Affected dogs are usually very thirsty and urinate profusely due to the high sugar content of the chocolate. Vomiting and diarrhoea are also features.

There is no specific antidote so treatment can only be supportive and symptomatic. However, in my experience, most cases do survive.

What you tell Aunt Cecily when she asks if you enjoyed the chocolates, or worse still, if she is joining you for Christmas lunch on the morrow and wants to know why your dear little doggie is on a drip in your vet's surgery, is entirely up to you!

Which brings me neatly to my next topic. Christmas lunch.

Please try to resist the temptation to toss your doggie a turkey bone to gnaw in lieu of his afternoon walk on Christmas Day whilst you snore in a post prandial coma.

Despite the fact that most turkeys never even see the sky, let alone fly in it, (which they couldn't anyway as they have been overfed to prepare them for the Christmas market in the shortest possible time), turkeys are avians and are genetically programmed to fly! As a result their bones are built for lightness and strength. They have much thinner-walled bones than mammals, but in order to maintain the strength of the bone, the internal cavity is criss-crossed with a myriad of very thin structures called trabeculae which give the bone enormous mechanical strength. Barnes-Wallis employed a very similar geodetic construction when he designed his Wellington bomber in the nineteen thirties, but that is another story altogether which we can go into in more detail if you like at some other time. ("No thanks, stick to the subject and stop waffling"). OK then. Well, anyway, the bone's very thinness, however, means that if it is snapped, as in your dog's jaws when he chomps on it, it can splinter into very sharp shards, especially if it has been desiccated by cooking. These sharp spicules of bone are then ingested into the delicate workings of your dog's digestive system with potentially disastrous consequences, as I am sure you can imagine, all of which are only going to contribute to the financing of your vet's New Year skiing holiday.

Which brings me deftly to my last topic! New Year.

Nowadays in this age of apparent plenty, ("Because you're worth it!"), it seems that many of us do actually have money to burn, and whereas at one time the ignition of fireworks was confined to the celebration and re-enactment of the anniversary of the burning at the stake of a Catholic dissenter on November the 5th, the firework season now extends from the beginning of October to the end of January with a discernible peak on New Year's Eve.

This can be a very stressful time for those of our canine companions who are of a nervous disposition.

Whereas up until recently we had relatively little with which to usefully calm their anxiety, tranquilisers of questionable value being all that was available to us, we now have some much more useful aids on offer.

Firstly there is DAP. DAP stands for Dog Appeasing Pheromone. This is a synthetic version of the pheromone secreted from the skin of nursing bitches and helps to calm dogs by giving them a feeling of well being and security. It is available in a diffuser which fits into an electrical socket and is best sited in the room in which your dog will spend most of his time when fireworks are being let off, although it will diffuse throughout your house. It is best to start this at least a month before the worst of the season so that the pheromone has time to pervade throughout the house and allow your dog's sense of well being in the house to grow. It can also be obtained in a spray form and this can be applied at any time to your dog's blanket or favourite toy placed in a refuge where he can feel safe, such as behind the sofa or in his bed or some place of his preference. This can be refreshed every 2 hours. We have been prescribing DAP now for a number of years and I am confident that it works, as clients who have had it in previous years return for more at about this time and give us very positive feedback.

In addition to DAP we now have tablets available called Xanax. These are not tranquilisers so will not make him sleep, but will help your dog to cope with his fear and anxiety as well as helping to lessen his memory of an unpleasant experience so that next time he experiences the fearful stimulus he will cope with it better and in time may not need to take the tablets any more. DAP and Xanax can of course be useful for dogs which are fearful of thunder and other loud noises. I have used both these products on my own dog who was fearful of thunder and fireworks, about both of which she has now become quite blasé.

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