

Human Medications Dangerous for Pets

MEDICATION EXPOSURE

We use medications for a wide variety of purposes in both human and veterinary medicine. Some drugs used in humans are never safe in dogs, or especially cats. Some of the drugs used in human medicine are also administered to veterinary patients, but at much smaller dosages. All drugs have the potential to cause harm when ingested at high enough doses; the point at which drugs stop being helpful and start causing harm is considered the toxic dose. Although almost any drug can be toxic to pets, there are some human medications that are most often implicated in poisoning.

Human pain relievers and anti-inflammatory drugs are a common cause of both accidental poisoning in pets or can be toxic when well-meaning pet owners try to treat the pet for pain using medications meant for people. **Aspirin** and **ibuprofen** are two such drugs; both are nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and can cause serious harm to the liver, gastrointestinal (GI) tract and kidneys of your pet. Clinical signs can vary from GI upset including mild vomiting, diarrhea and anorexia to extreme lethargy and blood in the vomit or stools. Clinical signs (“symptoms”) can take from hours to several days after ingestion to become apparent.

Acetaminophen (i.e., Tylenol), another common household pain reliever, has the potential to be very toxic to pets, especially cats. This drug can cause damage to their red blood cells which can lead to life-threatening anemia. In dogs, the bigger concern is liver damage that can lead to liver failure.

Many people have children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in their homes who are medicated with drugs that fall in the class of **amphetamines**. Common names for these drugs include Adderall, Concerta, Dexedrin, Focalin, Methylin, and Ritalin. These drugs can cause extreme hyperexcitability and high blood pressure when ingested. Often pets who have taken this type of medication inadvertently are reluctant to settle down and may pace excessively.

Antidepressants are also common within the home. Such drugs include Effexor, Cymbalta, Prozac, and Lexapro. These medications have been widely adopted in veterinary medicine, but doses are much smaller than what a human would ingest. Large doses can result in neurologic signs including seizures, extreme sedation, tremors or in certain scenarios can cause hyperexcitability and elevated blood pressure.

INITIAL TRIAGE OF TOXIC EXPOSURES

The important thing when you have either observed your pet ingesting a medication or find evidence of ingestion is not to panic. Write down the name of the drug, and your best estimate of the amount ingested (including number of pills and the dosage in milligrams or grams). Even a rough estimate of the number of pills ingested can be very helpful to determine if your pet may have received a toxic dose. Call your veterinarian’s office even if you are on your way in, as this can be helpful if the veterinarian needs to look up the drug’s toxic dose and effects and to be best prepared for your arrival. If the pill bottle/vial is available, bring it to the veterinary clinic with you. The names of some medications can be hard to pronounce or sound like other medications so that bringing the bottle along can assist with recommended therapy.

If you cannot reach a veterinarian quickly, call a pet poison hotline (North American numbers listed below). Not all drug ingestions require veterinary intervention, and the hotline often will be able to provide advice, even if that advice is to seek immediate veterinary

care. If the medication your pet ingested is not a common one, it is likely that your veterinarian will also call on the help of these experts to ensure the best treatment for your pet. When calling these hotlines, a case number will be assigned to your pet—be prepared to write this number down so that you can provide it to your veterinarian.

Take note of any vomit you find in the house. Although it may not sound pleasant, it is often helpful if you can scoop up any vomitus and bring it with you to the veterinarian’s office. They can then look for evidence of pills or capsules in it, and this might change the way they treat your pet. At the very least, take a look yourself for pills and make a guess as to the volume of vomitus.

DETOXIFICATION AND TREATMENT

Usually, removing the drug from your pet’s body is the first line of defense to prevent clinical signs (“symptoms”) associated with the medication. If the pet does not yet show signs of intoxication, and if ingestion of the medication was recent, the veterinarian is likely to administer an emetic to cause your pet to vomit. Vomiting does not always remove every bit of drug from your animal’s body and often other treatments are needed as well.

Activated charcoal is an oral medication that binds up ingested drugs that may not have been removed after vomiting has occurred. Most often, after your pet is made to vomit, he or she is then given drugs to stop further vomiting before the charcoal is given (with food, or by forced administration). Depending the drug that was ingested and the dose for your pet, several additional doses of activated charcoal may be necessary. Blood tests may be recommended prior to administration of activated charcoal to be sure that it will be safe.

Neither vomiting nor charcoal are recommended if your pet already shows signs of intoxication. Depending on the medication, dosage, and associated clinical signs, your veterinarian might recommend hospitalization with IV fluids and symptomatic care. Usually, when a pet is hospitalized for drug intoxication, blood tests will be recommended to determine the type and extent of organ damage, and to help determine the long-term prognosis (outlook).

DO’s

- Place all medications in a closed, locked, or secured cabinet that is out of reach of pets. Dogs can chew through most plastic bottles and cats can open unsecured cabinets or containers. Be sure that children that carry medications in backpacks to school put these away and out of the reach of pets.
- If you know or suspect that your pet has gotten into human medications, write down the name of the drug and the strength of the drug (for example, 100-milligram tablets). Estimate the number of pills or volume of liquid ingested. If possible, bring the medication container with you to the veterinary clinic.
- Have a quick look around for evidence of vomiting, and if found, either look for evidence of pills, or place the vomit in a plastic bag to take with you to the veterinarian’s office.
- Call your veterinarian, or a pet poison control hotline for immediate advice.

DON’Ts

- Don’t give medication meant for people to your pet without explicit instructions from your veterinarian on how and when to do so.
- Unless your veterinarian or the poison control center instructs you to do so, do not induce vomiting at home with salt or hydrogen

peroxide as this can cause serious side effects. The veterinarian will be in the best position to advise on whether the benefits of inducing vomiting outweigh the risks.

- Don't administer veterinary medications prescribed to other pets or residual medications from previous illnesses without veterinary instruction.

WHEN TO CALL YOUR VETERINARIAN

- If you observe your pet ingest a human medication or if you find evidence of ingestion, such as a chewed-up pill bottle.
- If you find that your pet has vomited and are suspicious of a toxic ingestion due to the presence of pills in the vomited material.
- If you find your pet unresponsive, unstable, or drunk in appearance, or if you are otherwise concerned about his or her status.

ROUTINE FOLLOW-UP

Follow up for toxic ingestion will often depend on the drug ingestion and may include repeat bloodwork, blood pressure checks, or neurologic assessment to determine if long-term side effects have occurred.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- ASPCA pet poison control hotline: 888-426-4435
- Pet poison control hotline: 855-764-7661

Practice Stamp or Name & Address

Also available in Spanish.