

Common Pet Poisonings

Every year vets treat a long line of pets who have been accidentally poisoned. Some die. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals publishes the list of commonest pet poisonings – and it's just as applicable to Australian pet owners.

Dogs and cats are often affected by eating the poison, BUT cats, ferrets and rabbits can be affected if the poison is on their coats (especially cats). Birds, fish, reptiles and invertebrates are more often affected by poisons in their environment – poisons in the air or water in their enclosures.

Take a look at the list and make sure that your pets are protected against these common poisons.

1. Human Medicines

Just as you keep medicines out of the reach of toddlers, so are pets attracted to medicines. As human medicines are being formulated to 'taste nice', so they are becoming more attractive to pets as well. US data suggests nearly a quarter of all pet poisonings are from 'human' medicines.

Some poisonings occur when the owner actually *gives* the pet the medicine, particularly for pain control. Unless your vet says otherwise, if it's not labelled for pet use, don't use it for pets. Also remember that medicine doses are based on weight, so an adult dose can be deadly to a 5kg pet!

The most common poisonings are:

Paracetamol – deadly in small doses to cats by damaging their blood cells (half a tablet can kill) and can cause severe liver damage and death in other species.

Ibuprofen – often sugar coated, ibuprofen can cause stomach ulceration, kidney and liver failure, intestinal ulceration and internal bleeding – leading to death or very slow recovery with treatment.

Blood Pressure Drugs – there are a number of these medications that are all very toxic to pets, producing changes in heartrate, fainting, and sometimes rapid death, even with treatment.

ADHD medications – even at very low doses, pets can die from very high temperatures, seizures and heart problems.

Anti-depressants – while some brands are occasionally used in pets, the human forms can cause death with nervous signs, incoordination, sedation or seizures. High heart rates, dangerously high blood pressure and high temperatures are also seen.

2. Insecticides

These are found in flea, ticks, flies, cockroaches, moths and other pest products. They may be 'pour ons', 'spot-ons', aerosols, sprays or washes.

Any invertebrate pets (stick insects, spiders, scorpions etc) will often die on contact with these products, and many sprays are also incredibly poisonous to pet fish.

The most dramatic poisonings in this category are when permethrin based 'spot on' products registered for dogs only are used on cats. The wrong products used on cats can produce excessive salivation, paw and ear flicking, vomiting and diarrhoea, progressing to depression, coma and death.

3. Rat and Mouse Poisons, Fox Baits, Rabbit Baits and Snail Baits

The first three are meant to kill mammals, so it stands to reason that any mammal pet can be poisoned. Many of these have a grain, meat or vegetable base. While for many products manufacturers thoughtfully

include bittering and colouring agents to warn you, pets will still take these baits and can die from blood problems and internal bleeding, seizures, or kidney failure.

These products are best avoided in the home, or used only under the strictest supervision. If you are walking with your pet in fox or rabbit baiting areas, watch for warning signs, don't let your pet out of your sight and keep pets on leash. In some cases, chewing the carcasses of poisoned animals can be equally deadly for your pet.

4. Chocolate

This deserves a special mention. Chocolate contains theobromine, which acts like caffeine and is toxic to pets. Chocolate also contains lots of sugar which attracts pets – particularly dogs. The general 'rule' is the 'darker' the chocolate the more toxic it is, but enough of any dark or milk chocolate can kill. Note that 'white chocolate' is not toxic. Symptoms include diarrhoea, vomiting, tremors, seizures, coma and death.

5. Human Foods

Onions, grapes & raisins, and some artificial sweeteners are all toxic to pets, as are avocado seeds, too much garlic, highly salted foods, macadamia nuts, coffee, and alcohol. Each can cause poisoning. If you share food with your pet, stick to treats that are closest to their natural diet eg leftover meat, cheeses or biscuits.

6. Plant Poisons

Plant poisoning usually affects puppies, who explore their environment with their mouths; but some pets get a taste for a plant, or have a deficiency in their diets causing them to eat inappropriate items in a search for that vitamin or mineral. Pets can be poisoned by plants in vases or compost heaps, as well as in the garden.

Poisonous plants in Australia include Lilies, Marijuana, Tulip Bulbs, Oleander, Azalea, Crysanthemum, Castor Oil Plant, Milkweed, English Ivy, Aloe Vera, Baby's Breath, Begonia, Morning Glory, Tomato Plants and Sago Palm. The Yew tree is especially poisonous to horses.

7. Pet Medicines

Many of these are developed to be palatable, which means the pet will eat as many as possible if they are left lying around. Thankfully in Australia most pet medicines are individually packed, but many pets will happily chew on the packaging to get the goodies inside!

8. Household cleaning products

These include detergents, grit based cleaners, alkaline cleaners and chlorine based products as well as gel or solid air fresheners and even car batteries. Many are corrosive and ulcerate the lining of the mouth, oesophagus and stomach. Do not make the pet vomit, get to the vet immediately.

9. Herbicides, Fungicides

There are many varieties, so keep pets away from treated areas until dry and read label directions carefully. All pets, including fish, ferrets, reptiles and invertebrate pets can be affected.

10. Antifreeze and other car chemicals

Less common in Australia than overseas, antifreeze is responsible for many pet deaths and car chemicals including oils, grease, window cleaners, tyre black and others are often kept in garages where pets have access.