



Poisoning can occur if a poisonous substance is swallowed (solids or liquids), breathed in (gases) or absorbed through the skin (normally liquids). Poisons are substances that damage the cells in the body. In order to cause harm they must enter the body. Many poisons are products we use every day and can be found in food, medications, and household substances. Accidental poisoning in dogs and cats is usually caused by substances we commonly have around the house, eg human medications and pest control products.

How can I stop my pet being poisoned?

Almost all cases of poisoning are accidental so the best way to prevent poisoning is to ensure that all poisons are kept out of reach of your pets (and children):

- Dispose of unwanted medicines safely.
- Put pest control products in pet-proof containers before putting them out.
- Be vigilant when walking your dog to ensure it does not pick up any unusual things.

Younger animals are more likely to be affected as often chew strange objects. Cats are less likely to be poisoned than dogs as they are naturally more suspicious of novel substances. Cats may be poisoned by licking off substances spilt on, or applied to, their coat.

What are the signs of poisoning?

In many cases of poisoning the owners are aware that their pet has eaten, or been in contact with, something unusual before signs of illness develop. You should be worried that your pet might have been poisoned if they suddenly develop severe clinical signs, or if they become ill with breathing difficulties, seizures or severe vomiting and diarrhoea. Every poison produces different effects and a poisoned pet may show a number of signs such as:

- Restlessness or drowsiness
- Vomiting or diarrhoea
- Salivation or drooling from the mouth
- Breathing difficulties
- Muscle tremors, twitching or seizures
- Confusion, or an abnormal reaction to sound or light
- Hallucinations
- Wobbly gait (ataxia)
- Changes in gum colour to blue, pale or even very red
- Unusual odours or smells (either on the breath or from contamination on the skin)
- Bite marks - (poison can result from a bite or a sting)
- Burns to the mouth or the tongue

What can I do if my pet is poisoned?

A rapid response is critical in cases of poisoning. If you suspect that your pet may have been poisoned:

- Protect the pet and remove it from the source of the intoxication
- Don't let other people handle your pet (disorientated or frightened animals may become aggressive and other people may be contaminated with the poison)
- Allow animals to drink water which may dilute ingested poisons
- Contact your vet for further advice and be prepared to take your pet to the hospital.
- If your pet has a toxic substance on its skin or coat the worst of the contamination may be washed off to reduce further absorption. Protective clothing must be worn and water only should be used - make sure you do not get contaminated in the process.

Getting urgent veterinary advice

The sooner a poisoned animal receives treatment, the higher its chances of recovery. If you think that your pet has been poisoned then contact your veterinary emergency service immediately, your pet's life may well depend on it. It is always better to phone in advance to warn the surgery that you are on your way. This will give them time to prepare everything they need and for you to check that there is someone available at the surgery to help you.



In most cases the best course of action is to get your pet to the veterinary surgery as soon as possible. However, in some cases you may be advised to give some immediate first-aid treatment at home. If your pet is already showing signs of poisoning do not attempt to make it vomit or drink anything but seek immediate veterinary care.

Should you make a poisoned pet vomit?

If a poison has been eaten in the last 2 hours it may be possible to remove it from the stomach by making the animal vomit. If your pet has swallowed an acidic or petroleum-based substance, eg paints, toilet cleaner, petrol, turpentine DO NOT induce vomiting (as this may cause further damage to the throat if the substance is brought up). Instead wash the mouth and face with water and give milk or water to drink (within 10 minutes of your pet swallowing the substance).

It is only safe to make your pet vomit if it:

- Is conscious
- Is alert or only mildly depressed
- Has an intact gag reflex, ie gags when you place your fingers at the back of its throat
- Is known NOT to have ingested caustic or petroleum-based substance

Never induce vomiting if your pet:

- Has already been sick
- Is unconscious or depressed
- Has eaten an acid/base or petroleum-based product which are highly corrosive and can do more damage if vomited up

How do I make my dog vomit?

Don't try to make your dog vomit (unless specifically instructed to do so by your vet), particularly if the agent or timing of exposure is questionable.

If you are able to make your dog vomit collect a sample and take it to your vet in case it is required for identification of possible intoxicant.

Vomiting can often be induced by giving salty water. Alternatively use washing soda - give as big a piece as you can get down the animal's throat (for a cat this is just a bit bigger than a pea). Place the crystal over the back of your pet's tongue so that it is swallowed. Your pet should vomit within 5 minutes - if not you can repeat this once. If your pet will not be sick do not keep giving further doses as soda crystals can themselves be poisonous.

What information will help my vet?

On arrival at the veterinary surgery someone will assess your pet immediately and make sure that its condition is stable before any other treatments are instigated. Your vet will want to know:

- If your pet has known access to possible poisons
- If so what poison
- When your pet had access to the poison
- How much was eaten or drunk
- If your pet is receiving any medication

If you are able to take a sample of the poison or any packaging associated with it then this may help your vet to provide the best care for your pet.

What are the common poisons in pets?

One of the most common causes of accidental poisoning in pets is owners giving human medication to their pet - often for pain relief. Never give medication to your pet unless instructed to do so by your vet.

Ibuprofen

Although ibuprofen can be bought in any chemist as a painkiller for humans it is extremely toxic to dogs (and cats). Just one tablet can cause gastric ulceration, liver damage, kidney failure and death. It is one of the most common causes of poisoning in pets.



Paracetamol

Dogs and cats cannot break down paracetamol safely and toxins quickly build up to dangerous levels - as little as half a 500mg tablet can kill an adult cat.

Slug pellets

The most common form of slug pellets contain metaldehyde. Dogs often find slug pellets attractive and will wander around the garden hoovering up pellets from treated areas. The poison causes excitement and seizures followed by depression and collapse. Avoid the use of chemicals in the garden if you have pets or confine your pets indoors or fence off treated areas.

Rat poison

Many rat poisons contain coumarins (warfarin or newer products with similar effects). Dogs often eat the poison directly whilst cats are most likely to be poisoned by eating a rodent already poisoned. Animals remain well for several days after eating the poison until their clotting factors are depleted. Repeated small doses are more toxic than single large doses. Signs include depression, weakness, breathing problems, and prolonged bleeding from any minor wounds or abrasions. Poisoned animals can bleed to death without treatment.

Cannabis

Dogs quite commonly eat cannabis but it rarely causes serious side-effects. Most affected dogs become excited and may salivate a lot. Sometimes affected pets will seem disorientated and may hallucinate - just as in people, appetite may be increased.

Food stuffs (Raisins, Onions and Chocolate)

Pets can be poisoned by human foodstuffs and these poisonings can be fatal. Raisin poisoning causes damage to the kidneys, chocolate poisoning affects the brain and onion poisoning can cause anaemia. In animals which are susceptible to these poisonings even a small amount (a piece of fruit cake, a few squares of dark chocolate) can have serious effects.

Adder bites

Snake bites are rare in most of the UK (although may be seen more often in some areas eg Cornwall). Three factors affect the seriousness of snake bites:

- size of animal bitten
- location of bite
- type of snake

Adder bites may require antisera - in general dogs require more antisera than humans.

Anti-freeze

Antifreeze has a sweet taste which is palatable to dogs and, more surprisingly, also to cats. Always keep antifreeze solutions out of the reach of pets. As little as 1 tsp per kg can kill (so a Labrador may only need to drink 100ml to be poisoned). The severity of the effects depends on the how quickly the poison is absorbed from the stomach and this is slowed by the presence of food in the stomach (in the absence of food the poison rapidly enters the bloodstream). Signs (vomiting, wobbliness/weakness, dehydration, and thirst) occur within 1 hour of poisoning. Mildly affected animals develop kidney failure (which might be treatable if caught early) whereas more severe cases have seizures or go into a coma.

Toad poisoning

The common toad is relatively harmless but all toads have glands in their skin which secrete unpleasant substances. Animals that have put toads in their mouth show excessive salivation and may paw at their mouth. Usually the signs resolve without treatment (pets may appreciate having their mouth washed out with a hose). In more severe poisonings signs include weakness, limb swelling and seizures.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your dog please contact Orwell Veterinary Group on 01473 33677 and we will be happy to advise you.