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ACETAMINOPHEN TOXICITY (TYLENOL TOXICITY)

What is it? Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is an over-the-counter pain reliever and fever reducing medication. This medication has a low margin of safety in dogs, and it is completely unsafe for cats. Animals metabolize this medication differently than people do, resulting in toxicity. Acetaminophen can cause life-threatening liver damage and it impairs the ability of red blood cells to carry oxygen, leading to other serious complications.

What animals are affected? Both dogs and cats are susceptible to acetaminophen toxicity, although cats are particularly sensitive to this drug. Cats should NEVER be given acetaminophen under any circumstances. Acetaminophen should be used in dogs ONLY with veterinary supervision.

Most toxic exposures in cats occur when well-intentioned owners administer the medication, assuming it will help the cat. Exposures in dogs often occur when they chew on a bottle and help themselves to a large quantity of medication.

What are the signs? Acetaminophen affects the gastrointestinal system, liver, and red blood cells. Symptoms might include: vomiting, drooling, abdominal pain, blue or chocolate brown oral mucous membranes (tongue/gums), breathing problems, brown urine, and swelling of the face and feet.

How is it diagnosed? An acetaminophen blood level can be measured if exposure is uncertain, but this test takes time. Most cases are diagnosed based on classic clinical symptoms and a known history of acetaminophen ingestion. History of exposure is important and it is critical for pet owners to be honest about any over the counter medications they have administered to their pets.

How is it treated? If the ingestion is caught early before symptoms develop, vomiting can be induced. Activated charcoal is then administered to help prevent further absorption of the toxin. If clinical symptoms are already occurring, hospitalization for aggressive supportive care is required. Treatment includes IV fluid therapy and medications to support the liver. One important medication, N-acetylcysteine (*Mucomyst*), helps with metabolism of the acetaminophen and can reduce the extent of liver injury. If red blood cell injury is severe and anemia (low red blood cell count) develops, a blood transfusion and oxygen therapy may be necessary.

What after care is needed? If pets survive the initial phases of toxicity, follow up care will be needed to monitor liver values and a complete blood count. Some pets may require long term liver protectant medications. There have been reports of some cats and dogs developing “dry eye” down the road. These patients show decreased tear production and they may need an artificial tear drop or ointment.

What is the prognosis? The prognosis depends on the dose of acetaminophen ingested and the clinical symptoms that develop. Cats may die within 18-36 hours due to the red blood cell damage. Dogs may die several days after ingestion of acetaminophen due to liver necrosis. Recovery time depends on the dose ingested and how quickly medical intervention is provided. The larger the dose, the longer it will take for the pet to recover.

Can it be prevented? Yes – Use extreme caution when administering acetaminophen to dogs (use only with veterinary supervision) and NEVER administer acetaminophen to cats.