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CHOCOLATE TOXICITY

What is it? Ingestion of chocolate – All forms of chocolate except White chocolate are potentially toxic to pets. This includes Baking Chocolate, Cocoa Powder, and even garden mulch made from cocoa hulls. Generally, the darker the chocolate the more of the toxic substance (theobromine) is contained in the product.

Ingestion of as little as one ounce of milk chocolate per pound of body weight of your pet can result in signs of toxicity. Therefore, it requires less than 1 ounce per pound of body weight for darker chocolates to make your pet sick. Remember, one pound of chocolate contains 16 ounces.

Who gets it? Generally dogs are the pets most affected by chocolate toxicity. They seem to be more interested in eating things that they should not than most cats. Smaller dogs typically will have more problems with chocolate toxicity simply because it takes more chocolate to make bigger dogs sick.

Chocolate is often a holiday treat for many people. The incidence of toxicity increases during Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter, and Halloween.

What are the clinical signs? Signs are related to how much chocolate is ingested. At low doses, gastrointestinal signs (vomiting and diarrhea) predominate. As the amount of chocolate ingested rises, you will start to see problems with hyperexcitability, increased heart rate and problems with abnormal heart rhythms (called arrhythmias), low blood pressure, collapse, and at very high doses, seizures are possible.

Because vomiting and diarrhea are so common with this toxicity, other problems can develop as a result of becoming dehydrated.

Unfortunately, we do know of a small number of dogs every year that die as a result of untreated chocolate toxicity.

How is it diagnosed? Generally diagnosis is made by observation of the pet getting into chocolate – wrappers on the floor, missing packages, and empty candy dishes. Of course, vomiting that smells like chocolate is a dead give-away. However, often vomiting occurs later – after the chocolate is out of the stomach. So, just because the vomit does not smell like chocolate, does not mean that they have not gotten into it.

How is it treated? If caught soon after eating the chocolate, inducing vomiting is often the first step in preventing problems from developing. Generally this needs to be done within the first hour or two following ingestion. Do not induce vomiting in a dog that is already vomiting, who has collapsed or is seizing.

Activated charcoal is often administered to dogs that have eaten chocolate. This medication prevents absorption of chocolate from the gut. Often, repeat doses are administered every 4-8 hours. Often, outpatient therapy to limit absorption of the chocolate is all that is required.

If clinical signs have already developed, then treatment is supportive in nature and may require hospitalization. IV fluids are administered to treat dehydration, support blood pressure, and to enhance elimination of toxins from the body. Heart rate and blood pressure are monitored and injectable medications can be administered to control heart rate and blood pressure. Finally, injectable medications can be administered to control seizures if they are noticed.

What is the aftercare? Most pets may require a bland diet for the first few days following exposure. Beyond that, the biggest thing to remember is that, as smart as we think they are, our pets will not learn from experience that chocolate is bad for them. Preventing repeat exposure is the most important thing afterwards.

What is the prognosis? If caught immediately, the prognosis for preventing problems is excellent. Generally, within 24-36 hours, most patients that require hospitalization are improved to the point that they can go home. Most patients do not suffer any long term consequences.