Chocolate Toxicity in Dogs

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

CHOCOLATE, ONE OF THE MOST PREVALENT HOLIDAY TREATS, is also one of the most toxic foods your dog can consume.

Why is chocolate dangerous for your dog?

Both milk chocolate and dark chocolate contain toxins called methylxanthines in the form of caffeine and theobromine. Caffeine is a well-known stimulant. Theobromine, a bitter, colorless chemical, increases urine production, dilates blood vessels, and stimulates the heart. Methylxanthines are also found in coffee, tea, cola, and cocoa bean hulls (landscape bedding).

Just how much chocolate is too much?

Ideally, your dog should never consume chocolate. Mild symptoms occur with the ingestion of 9 mg per pound of body weight of either caffeine or theobromine. Severe signs occur around 20 mg/lb. Seizures and possible death can occur after ingestion of 27 mg of theobromine or caffeine per pound of body weight. Since milk chocolate contains 58 mg/oz of theobromine, a dose of less than 1 oz of milk chocolate per pound of body weight could potentially cause death. Less than 0.1 oz of baking chocolate per pound of body weight could be lethal, and less than 0.075 oz per pound of cocoa could be toxic. Usually the more bitter the chocolate, the higher the level of theobromine.

What symptoms will your dog exhibit after eating too much chocolate?

Methylxanthines cause many problems - usually within 6-12 hours after ingestion.

Common symptoms include:

- Accelerated breathing or panting
- Increased heart rate
- Irregular heart beat
- Restlessness
- Hyperactivity
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Increased thirst and drinking
- Loss of muscle coordination
- Muscle tremors
- Increased body temperature
- Seizures
- Coma

What should you do if your dog ingests chocolate?

First, call your veterinarian, who will evaluate the situation and likely provide instructions on how to make your dog vomit. If possible, note the type of chocolate and estimate the amount eaten. If your regular veterinarian is unavailable, seek emergency care immediately.

How will your veterinarian treat excessive chocolate ingestion?

If a trip to the veterinarian is required, he or she may induce more vomiting in your dog to continue expelling the chocolate from his system. Your veterinarian may also administer activated charcoal to absorb remaining toxins. Your dog may receive IV fluids to prevent dehydration and increase urine production, since some toxins may be reabsorbed from the urinary bladder. A urinary catheter may also be required. If your dog has a fever or seizures, your veterinarian will also take steps to treat those conditions. Throughout treatment, your veterinarian will closely monitor your dog's heart rate and rhythm, and give heart-stabilizing medications if indicated.

What is the prognosis for dogs who've ingested too much chocolate?

Dogs treated within 6-12 hours of ingestion usually recover with hospitalization and aggressive therapy. However, if enough methylxanthines are absorbed, chocolate ingestion may lead to coma, cardiac failure, or death.

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If you think your pet has been poisoned...

Contact your veterinarian or one of the following Animal Poison Hotlines:
ASPCA National Animal Poison Control Center
1-888-4ANI-HELP - (1-888-426-4435) $65 per case*, billed to your credit card only.
Free follow-up calls at 1-888-299-2973.
*Calls involving a product covered by the Animal Product Safety Service are free.

Pet Poison Helpline - 24-hour service available throughout North America for pet owners and veterinary professionals who require assistance with treating a potentially poisoned pet.
1-800-213-6680 ($35.00 per incident). Staffed 24-hours a day.

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