

Holiday Tips for Dog Owners

Ease the stress of the coming season with these expert tips.

Maureen Kochan

You've decked the halls, wrapped packages, and shopped till you dropped. But have you done everything to protect your dog from potential holiday hazards?

Patty Letawsky has. Her Christmas tree stands in a room that she can close off, hazardous plants like poinsettias sit high above curious noses, and there's not a bit of tinsel — a potential choking hazard — in sight.

"An ounce of prevention equals a happy holiday, with no unexpected vet bills," says the California resident and owner of rescued, mixed-breed dogs Jake, Malcolm, and Gus.

But not every dog owner is as prepared as Letawsky. Given the demands of the season, it's easy to understand why, says Deirdre Chiaramonte, DVM, a veterinarian at the Animal Medical Center in New York. "The holidays are hectic," she says. "Busy owners can overlook common hazards."

To make sure the holidays are happy and safe for your dog, follow these simple tips from the experts:

Around the house

The hazard: Christmas trees

The prevention: Keep your dog from toppling the Christmas tree by securing the tree to a wall, ceiling, or drapery rod with sturdy fishing line, Chiaramonte suggests. Make tree water, which can harbor dangerous bacteria and chemicals, a no-drinking zone by covering the tree stand reservoir with aluminum foil or a tree skirt. Pick up fallen pine needles, which can injure your dog's intestines if eaten, and tape down or cover electrical cords to prevent shocks, burns, and other serious injuries.

The hazard: Tinsel

The prevention: Skip the tinsel. This time-honored holiday decoration has long been a no-no for pets. If swallowed, tinsel can cause choking, or intestinal blockages and tears. It often requires surgery to repair.

The hazard: Packages and gifts

The prevention: Keep dogs away from wrapped packages as well as wrapping supplies, since eating string, glue, rubber bands, staples, ribbon, plastic, cellophane, cloth, and even wrapping paper can lead to intestinal blockages or choking, Chiaramonte says. Keep in mind that some wrapped packages may contain dangerous edible items, such as dark chocolate or macadamia nuts. Ask the gift giver whether the package contains food before placing it under the Christmas tree.

The hazard: Children's toys

The prevention: Small toy pieces and balls can cause choking and intestinal blockages, Chiaramonte says. After opening gifts, set aside small items or stow them in a nearby closet until they can be safely put away.

On the table

The hazard: People food

The prevention: Many holiday foods such as fatty meat, garlic, onion, some nuts, gravy, poultry skin, dough, raisins, coffee, bones, chocolate, artificial sweeteners, and alcohol can cause illnesses ranging from vomiting and diarrhea to pancreatitis and other toxic reactions, says Steven Hansen, DVM, senior vice president of the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center. Designate a family member to guard unattended plates and glasses, or place your dog in his crate or a quiet room until the meal is done or guests go home.

The hazard: Candles

The prevention: Place menorahs and other holiday candles far from your dog's reach so he can't knock them over, Chiaramonte suggests. Extinguish all candles before going to bed or leaving the house.

The hazard: Toxic plants

The prevention: Some of the most popular living symbols of the holidays are toxic to dogs and can cause symptoms from

gastrointestinal irritation and diarrhea to cardiac problems, even death, Hansen says. Plants to avoid include Christmas cactus, holly, lilies, mistletoe, poinsettia, hemlock, and ivy. If you can't ban these problem plants altogether, keep them far from your pet's reach, and immediately pick up and discard fallen leaves, stems, and berries.

At the party

The hazard: Guests who feed your dog

The prevention: Ask your guests to refrain from feeding people food to your dog, Hansen says. Aside from encouraging begging, feeding your dog rich holiday table scraps can result in serious illness, including pancreatitis. If you're throwing a party, consider boarding your dog for the day, or create a quiet zone for him far away from the action. If you want your dog at the party, provide a limited number of dog treats for guests to give your dog, and ban toxic ingredients like chocolate from the menu.

The hazard: Open doors and gates

The prevention: Holiday guests and other activities can leave you distracted, so be sure to close and lock doors and gates after guests arrive or leave. Better yet, place your dog in his crate or a quiet room with the door closed while guests come and go, Chiaramonte says. Be sure your dog is wearing his collar and ID tag, and if your dog is microchipped, check with the microchipping service to confirm that your address and phone number are current.

The hazard: Stress

The prevention: Busy and erratic holiday schedules, steady streams of strangers, and even changes to your home like rearranging furniture to accommodate a Christmas tree can stress out even the most mellow of dogs. Limit stress by maintaining your dog's regular exercise and feeding schedules. Give him a nice, long walk before guests arrive or before you go out for the evening. Provide a quiet spot where he can "get away" from company. And add a fun toy or dog treat to your holiday shopping list. Special treats can provide a great distraction for a stressed-out dog and help him — and you — to better enjoy a happy and safe holiday.

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