

POISONS TO CATS....

GENERAL INFORMATION

A poison is any substance harmful to the body. Cats by nature are curious and have a tendency to hunt small game or explore out-of-the-way places such as wood piles, weed thickets and storage ports. These environments put them into contact with insects, dead animals and toxic plants. It also means that in many cases of suspected poisoning the actual agent will be unknown. The great variety of potentially poisonous plants and shrubs makes identification difficult or impossible unless the owner has direct knowledge that the cat has eaten a certain plant or product. Most cases suspected of being malicious poisoning actually are not.

In some types of vegetation only certain parts of the plant are toxic. In others, all parts are poisonous. Ingestion causes a wide range of symptoms. They include: mouth irritation; drooling; vomiting; diarrhea; hallucinations; seizures; coma; and death. Other plant substances cause skin rash. Some toxic plants have specific pharmacological actions that are used in medicines.

This list is a collection of common toxic plants. It is not a list of all poisonous plants.

POISONOUS HOUSEPLANTS

TOXIC HOUSEPLANTS may cause a rash after contact with the skin or mouth:

- Chrysanthemum Weeping fig
- Creeping fig Poinsettia

IRRITATING PLANTS, some of which contain oxalic acid that causes mouth swelling; and occasionally may cause generalized toxicity such as staggering and collapse:

- Arrowhead vine Malanga
- Boston ivy Marble queen
- Caladium Mother-in-law plant (snake plant)
- Calla or Arum lily Neththyis
- Dumbcane Parlor ivy
- Elephant's ear Pothos or Devil's lily
- Emerald duke Peace lily
- Heart leaf Red princess (philodendron)
- Jack-in-the-pulpit Saddle leaf (philodendron)
- Majesty Split leaf (philodendron)

TOXIC PLANTS may contain a wide variety of poisons. Most cause vomiting, abdominal pain, cramps. Some cause tremors, heart and respiratory or kidney problems, which are difficult for an owner to interpret:

- Amaryllis Ivy
- Asparagus fern Jerusalem cherry
- Azalea Needlepoint ivy
- Bird of paradise Pot mum
- Creeping charlie Ripple ivy
- Crown of thorns Spider mum
- Elephant ears Sprangeri fern

- Glocal ivy Umbrella plant
- Heart ivy

OUTDOOR PLANTS WITH TOXIC EFFECTS

OUTDOOR PLANTS that produce vomiting and diarrhea in some cases:

- Delphinium Skunk cabbage Larkspur
- Daffodil Poke weed Indian tobacco
- Castor bean Bittersweet woody Wisteria
- Indian turnip Ground cherry Soap berry
- Fox glove

TREES AND SHRUBS that are poisonous and may produce vomiting, abdominal pain and in some cases diarrhea:

- Azalea Western yew Wild cherry (rhododendron)
- Horse chestnut Privet Balsam pear
- Buckeye Mock orange Black locust
- Rain tree Bird of paradise bush English Yew
- Monkey pod Apricot, almond English holly
- American yew Peach cherry Japanese plum

OUTDOOR PLANTS with varied toxic effects:

- Rhubarb Buttercup Moonseed
- Spinach Nightshade May apple
- Sunburned potatoes Poison hemlock Dutchman's breeches
- Loco weed Pig weed Angel's trumpet
- Lupine Water hemlock Jasmine
- Dologeton Mushrooms Matrimony vine

HALLUCINOGENS:

- Marijuana Nutmeg Peyote
- Morning glory Periwinkle Loco weed

CONVULSIONS:

- China berry Moonweed Water hemlock
- Coriaria Nux vomica

TREATING FOR CONTACT WITH TOXINS OR POISONS

If you think your cat may have been poisoned, first try to identify the poison. Most products containing chemicals are labeled for identification. Read the label. If this does not give you a clue to the plant's possible toxicity, call the emergency room of your local hospital and ask for information from the Poison Control Center. Alternately, call the National Animal Poison Control Center at (800)548-2423 or (900)680-0000. This hotline is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There is a credit card charge for the consultation.

The most important step in treatment is to eliminate the poison from your cat's stomach by making the cat vomit. In certain cases, induction of vomiting is contraindicated. For more information, see How to Induce Vomiting earlier in this chapter.

HOW TO DELAY OR PREVENT ABSORPTION

Activated charcoal is used to coat the bowel and delay or prevent absorption. In most cases it is difficult to administer activated charcoal to a cat without first placing a stomach tube. Mix one part activated charcoal to six parts cold water. Give four to eight teaspoons. Follow 30 minutes later with Milk of Magnesia, 1/2 teaspoon per five pounds body weight. Placing a stomach tube in a cat is not without risk. The best advice for a severely ill cat is to induce vomiting and then proceed directly to the nearest veterinary facility.

In the less severely ill cat, coat the bowel with milk, egg whites or vegetable oil. The dose of vegetable oil is two teaspoons for the average-sized cat. It should be added to the feed, but not force-fed by mouth because this could lead to aspiration pneumonia.

If your cat has a poisonous substance on the skin or coat, flush the area with copious amounts of water for five minutes. Wearing gloves, give the cat a complete bath in lukewarm, not cold, water, as described in the SKIN chapter. Even if not irritating the skin, the substance should be removed. Otherwise, the cat may lick it off and swallow it. Soak gasoline and oil stains with mineral or vegetable oil (do not use paint thinner or turpentine). Work in well. Then wash with a mild soap. Rub in cornstarch or flour.

A cat beginning to show signs of nervous system involvement is in deep trouble. At this point, get your cat to a veterinarian as quickly as possible. Try to bring a sample of vomitus, or better yet the actual poison in the original container. Do not delay to administer first aid. If the cat is convulsing, unconscious or not breathing, see CPR.

Prevention: Prevent roaming, especially in grain and livestock areas where rat poisons may have been placed. Store all poisons in original containers in a safe location out of reach of cats. When using snail bait poisons, use commercial holders designed to keep bait away from pets.

The poisons discussed below are included because they are among the most frequently seen by veterinarians.

STRYCHNINE

Strychnine is used as a rat, mouse and mole poison. It is also a common coyote bait. It is available commercially as coated pellets dyed purple, red or green. Signs of poisoning are so typical that the diagnosis can be made almost at once. Onset is sudden (less than two hours). The first signs are agitation, excitability and apprehension. They are followed rather quickly by intensely painful tetanic seizures that last about 60 seconds, during which the cat throws the head back, can't breathe and turns blue. The slightest stimulation such as tapping the cat or clapping the hands starts a seizure. This characteristic response is used to make the diagnosis. Other signs associated with nervous system involvement are tremors, champing, drooling, uncoordinated muscle spasms, collapse and paddling of the legs.

Seizures due to strychnine and other central nervous system toxins are sometimes misdiagnosed as epilepsy. This error would be a mistake because immediate veterinary attention is necessary. Epileptic seizures usually last a few minutes and do not recur during the same episode. Signs always appear in a certain order, and each attack is the same. They are over before the cat can get to a veterinarian. Usually, they are not considered emergencies (see NERVOUS SYSTEM: Seizure Disorders).

Treatment: If your cat is showing the first signs of poisoning and hasn't vomited, induce vomiting as discussed earlier in this chapter. Do not induce vomiting if the cat exhibits signs of labored breathing.

With signs of central nervous system involvement, do not take time to induce vomiting. It is important to avoid loud noises or unnecessary handling that might trigger a seizure. Cover your cat with a coat or blanket and go to the nearest veterinary clinic.

SODIUM FLUOROACETATE (1080)

This chemical, used as a rat poison, is mixed with cereal, bran and other rat feeds. It is so potent that cats and dogs can be poisoned just by eating a dead rodent. The onset is sudden and begins with vomiting-- followed by agitation, straining to urinate or defecate, a staggering gait, atypical fits or true convulsions and then collapse. Seizures are not triggered by external stimuli as are those of strychnine poisoning.

Treatment: Immediately after the cat ingests the poison, induce vomiting. Care and handling is the same as for strychnine. A specific antidote is available.

ARSENIC

Arsenic is combined with metaldehyde in slug and snail baits and may appear in ant poisons, weed killers and insecticides. Arsenic is also a common impurity found in many chemicals. Death can occur quickly, before there is time to observe the symptoms. In more protracted cases the signs are thirst, drooling, vomiting, staggering, intense abdominal pain, cramps, diarrhea, paralysis and death. The breath of the cat has a strong odor of garlic.

Treatment: Induce vomiting. A specific antidote is available. See your veterinarian.

METALDEHYDE

This poison, often combined with arsenic, is used commonly in rat, snail and slug baits. The signs of toxicity are excitation, drooling and slobbering, uncoordinated gait, muscle tremors and weakness that leads to inability to stand within a few hours of ingestion. The tremors are not triggered by external stimuli.

Treatment: Immediately after the cat ingests the poison, induce vomiting. The care and handling are the same as for strychnine.

LEAD

Lead is found in insecticides and serves as a base for many commercial paints. Intoxication occurs mainly in kittens and young cats that chew on substances coated with a lead paint. Other sources of lead are linoleum, batteries and plumbing materials. Lead poisoning can occur in older cats following the ingestion of an insecticide containing lead. A chronic form does occur.

Acute poisoning begins with abdominal colic and vomiting. In the chronic form, a variety of central nervous system signs are possible. They include fits, uncoordinated gait, excitation, attacks of hysteria, weakness, stupor and blindness. These are signs of encephalitis.

Treatment: Immediately after ingestion, induce vomiting. Seek immediate medical attention. Specific antidotes are available through your veterinarian.

PHOSPHORUS

This chemical is present in rat and roach poisons, fireworks, flares, matches and matchboxes. A poisoned cat may have a garlic odor to its breath. The first signs of intoxication are vomiting and diarrhea. They may be followed by a symptom-free interval--then by recurrent vomiting, cramps, pain in the abdomen, convulsions and coma. There is no specific antidote. Treat as you would for strychnine.

ZINC PHOSPHIDE

This substance also is found in rat poisons. Intoxication causes central nervous system depression; labored breathing; vomiting (often of blood); weakness; convulsions; and death. There is no specific antidote. Treat as you would for strychnine.

RODENTICIDE ANTICOAGULANTS

Accidental ingestion of anticoagulant rodenticides placed by laymen and commercial exterminators is a common cause of bleeding in cats. These poisons exert their effect by blocking the synthesis of Vitamin K, which is required for normal blood clotting. Vitamin K deficiency results in spontaneous bleeding. There are no observable signs of poisoning until the cat begins to pass blood in the stool or urine, bleeds from the nose, or develops hemorrhages beneath the gums and skin. The cat may be found dead from internal hemorrhage.

The first generation coumadin anticoagulants (warfarin, pindone) required repeated exposure to produce lethal effects. However, newer second generation anticoagulants of the bromadiolone and brodifacoum groups, including D-Con, Mouse Prufe II, Harvoc and Talan require only a single exposure. In fact, a cat can become poisoned if it eats a rodent killed by one of these products. In addition, these poisons remain in the cat's system for a long time and can require medical treatment for up to one month.

Treatment: Identify the exact anticoagulant if possible. Induce vomiting on suspicion of ingestion. Seek veterinary attention. Spontaneous bleeding is corrected with fresh whole blood or frozen plasma. Vitamin K is a specific antidote. It is given by injection, after which the cat is placed on Vitamin K tablets for several days or weeks.

OTHER RODENTICIDES

Rampage is a popular cereal bait poison that contains Vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol). Toxic levels of Vitamin D3 cause a sudden rise in blood calcium levels, leading to vomiting and diarrhea, seizures and heart and kidney failure. Treatment is directed at lowering the serum calcium and requires veterinary management.

Bromethalin is a rodenticide found in Assault and Vengeance (Velsicol). One to two tablespoons are toxic to cats. Signs of poisoning include agitation, staggering, muscle tremors, high fever, stupor and seizures. Death is common once symptoms appear. Induce vomiting on suspicion of ingestion and seek immediate veterinary attention.

ANTIFREEZE (ETHYLENE GLYCOL)

Poisoning with antifreeze is one of the most common poisoning conditions found in cats because ethylene glycol has a sweet taste that appeals to cats and dogs. One teaspoon of antifreeze can kill an average-sized cat. Signs of toxicity, which appear suddenly, are vomiting, uncoordinated gait (seems "drunk"), weakness, stupor and coma. Death can occur in 12 to 36 hours. Convulsions are unusual. Cats that recover from the acute poisoning may have damage to their kidneys and go on to kidney failure. **Treatment:** Induce vomiting on suspicion of ingestion and proceed at once to the nearest veterinary facility. Intravenous alcohol is a specific antidote. Intensive care in an animal hospital may prevent kidney complications.

ORGANOPHOSPHATES AND CARBAMATES

These substances are used on cats to kill fleas and other parasites. Common organophosphates are Chlorpyrifos and Carbaryl, but there are others. They are also used in garden sprays and in some

dewormers. Improper application of insecticides to the cat can lead to absorption of a toxic dose through the skin. These drugs affect the nervous system primarily. Insecticides are discussed in the SKIN chapter.

PETROLEUM PRODUCTS (GASOLINE, KEROSENE, TURPENTINE)

These volatile liquids can cause pneumonia if aspirated or inhaled. The signs of toxicity are vomiting, difficulty in breathing, tremors, convulsions and coma. Death is by respiratory failure.

Treatment: Do not induce vomiting. Administer water, fruit juice, or soda pop by mouth (one ounce per six pounds body weight). Be prepared to administer artificial breathing.

CHLORINATED HYDROCARBONS

These compounds, like the organophosphates, are incorporated into some insecticide preparations (not for use on cats). The common products in veterinary use are Chlordane, Toxaphene, Lindane, and Methoxychlor. Accidental application to cats produces muscle twitching, excitation and convulsions. Bathe the animal immediately to remove the substance from its coat. Veterinary attention is imperative.

CORROSIVES (ACID AND ALKALI)

Corrosives and caustics are found in household cleaners, drain decloggers and commercial solvents. When ingested, they cause burns of the mouth, esophagus and stomach. Severe cases are associated with acute perforation (or late stricture) of the esophagus and stomach.

Treatment: Rinse out your cat's mouth. Administer water or soda pop by mouth (one ounce per six pounds body weight), then give two teaspoons of vegetable oil once. You can add this to the cat's food. The practice of giving an acid to neutralize an alkali and vice versa is no longer recommended because it causes heat injury to the lining of the stomach.

In either situation, do not induce vomiting. Vomiting could result in rupture of the stomach and burns of the esophagus.

GARBAGE POISONING (FOOD POISONING)

Cats are more particular than dogs about what they eat. Nevertheless, they are also scavengers and come into contact with carrion (rotting flesh or meat), decomposing foods, animal manure and other noxious substances (some of which are listed in DIGESTIVE SYSTEM: Diarrhea). Cats are more sensitive than dogs to food poisoning and exhibit effects at lower levels.

Signs of poisoning begin with vomiting and pain in the abdomen. In severe cases they are followed two to six hours later by a diarrhea that is often bloody. Shock may occur--particularly if the problem is complicated by bacterial infection. Mild cases recover in one to two days.

Treatment: Seek immediate veterinary attention for signs of dehydration, toxicity and shock. In mild cases, coat the bowel as described earlier in this chapter.

TOAD AND SALAMANDER POISONING

In the United States there are two species of poisonous toad (Bufo). The Colorado River Toad is found in the Southwest and Hawaii. The Marine Toad is found in Florida. There is one species of poisonous salamander, the California newt, found in California.

All toads have a bad taste. Cats that mouth them slobber, spit and drool. The Marine Toad is highly poisonous, causing death in as little as 15 minutes.

Symptoms in cats depend on the toxicity of the toad or salamander and the amount of poison absorbed. They vary from merely slobbering to convulsions, blindness and death.

Treatment: Flush out your cat's mouth (use a garden hose if necessary) and induce vomiting as described earlier in this chapter. Be prepared to administer CPR. Cats with salamander poisoning usually recover quickly.

PEOPLE MEDICINES

Veterinarians frequently are called because a cat has swallowed pills intended for the owner or has eaten too many pills prescribed for the cat. (Some cat pills are flavored to encourage cats to eat them.) Drugs most commonly involved are antihistamines, pain relievers, sleeping pills, diet pills, heart preparations and vitamins.

Cats appear to be unusually sensitive to drugs and medications. The reasons for this are discussed in the chapter DRUGS AND MEDICATIONS. Common household items considered safe for humans may be toxic to cats. All episodes of drug ingestion should be taken seriously. They need to be brought to the vet right away.....

Very important to print this list and keep in a safe and easy to get to spot like on your fridge or by your telephone.

Excerpted from the Cat Owner's Home Veterinary Handbook