

# Dangerous Foods: Are They Harmful to Your Dog?

By: Courtesy of Dr. Dawn Ruben

Americans spend over \$10 billion dollars a year on food for our pets. Despite buying the best food available, some pets would rather eat what we eat. However, certain foods can be dangerous to your pet, causing varying degrees of illness. Some food is toxic due to ingredients and some by improper cooking, storage or poor hygiene.

**Alcoholic Beverages.** Ethanol is the component in alcoholic beverages that can be toxic when an excessive amount is ingested. Pets are much smaller than us and can be highly affected by small amounts of alcohol. Exercise caution when drinks and pets are together. Toxicity can cause a wide variety of signs and symptoms, and may result in death. Signs may include odor of alcohol on the animal's breath, staggering, behavioral changes, excitement, depression, increased urination, slowed respiratory rate or cardiac arrest and death.

**Apples, Apricots, Cherries, Peaches and Plums.** Ingestion of large amounts of stems, seeds and leaves of these fruits can be toxic. They contain a cyanide type compound and signs of toxicity include apprehension, dilated pupils, difficulty breathing, hyperventilation and shock.

**Avocados.** The leaves, fruit, bark and seeds of avocados have all been reported to be toxic. The toxic component in the avocado is "persin," which is a fatty acid derivative. Symptoms of toxicity include difficulty breathing, abdominal enlargement, abnormal fluid accumulations in the chest, abdomen and sac around the heart. The amount that needs to be ingested to cause signs is unknown. Do not feed your pet any component of the avocado.

**Baking Powder and Baking Soda.** Baking soda and baking powder are both leavening agents. A leavening agent is a common ingredient in baked goods that produces a gas causing batter and dough to rise. Baking soda is simply sodium bicarbonate. Baking powder consists of baking soda and an acid, usually cream of tartar, calcium acid phosphate, sodium aluminum sulfate or a mixture of the three. Ingestion of large amounts of baking soda or baking powder can lead to electrolyte abnormalities (low potassium, low calcium and/or high sodium), congestive heart failure or muscle spasms.

**Chocolate.** Chocolate, in addition to having a high fat content, contains caffeine and theobromine. These two compounds are nervous system stimulants and can be toxic to your dog in high amounts. The levels of caffeine and theobromine vary between different types of chocolate. For example, white chocolate has the lowest concentration of stimulants and baking chocolate or cacao beans have the highest concentration.

Depending on the type of chocolate ingested and the amount eaten, various problems can occur. The high fat content in chocolate may result in vomiting and possibly diarrhea. Once toxic levels are eaten, the stimulant effect becomes apparent. You may notice restlessness, hyperactivity, muscle twitching, increased urination and possibly excessive panting. Heart rate and blood pressure levels may also increase. Seizure activity may occur in severe cases.

**Coffee (grounds and beans).** Dogs that eat coffee grounds or beans can get "caffeine" toxicity. The symptoms are very similar to those of chocolate toxicity and can be just as or even more serious.

**Fatty Foods.** Rich and fatty food are favorites of dogs. They often get them as treats, leftovers or from getting into the trash. These fatty foods can cause pancreatitis. Pancreatitis can affect any pet but miniature or toy poodles, cocker spaniels and miniature schnauzers are particularly prone. Signs of pancreatitis generally include an acute onset of vomiting, sometimes diarrhea and abdominal pain. Abdominal pain is often evidenced by hunched posture or "splinting" of the abdomen when picked up. The dog may become very sick quickly and often needs intensive fluid and antibiotic therapy.

**Grapes and Raisins.** So far, about 10 dogs poisoned by grapes and raisins have been officially reported to the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center. The amount of grapes or raisins ingested has been between 9 ounces to 2 pounds, and dogs ingesting these large amounts have developed kidney failure. Aggressive, and sometimes prolonged, treatment may be necessary to give the affected dog a chance at survival; without treatment death is possible. Despite testing, the reason for the kidney failure and the amount necessary for toxicity remains unknown. For now, any dog that ingests large amounts of grapes or raisins should be treated aggressively, so contact your veterinarian immediately if ingestion has occurred.

**Macadamia Nuts.** Macadamia nuts, also called the Queensland nut or Australia nut, can be toxic. The mechanism behind why these nuts are toxic is a mystery. However, it has been noted that as few as six to 40 nuts in dogs have caused severe toxic signs. Dogs develop weakness, depression, vomiting, difficulty walking, tremors, abdominal pain, lameness, stiffness and/or pale gums. The signs usually dissipate in 12 to 24 hours.

**Moldy or Spoiled Food.** Dogs love to get into the trash. A medical problem arises when the trash contains moldy or spoiled food. In addition to food poisoning, some pets can develop tremors related to the ingestion of certain molds.

**Nutmeg.** You may not realized this but high levels of nutmeg can be toxic, even fatal. The toxic principle is not well understood. Signs of toxicity include tremors, seizures, nervous system abnormalities or death.

**Onions or Garlic.** Dogs and cats lack the enzyme necessary to properly digest onions and this could result in gas, vomiting, diarrhea or severe gastrointestinal distress. If large amounts of onion or garlic are ingested or onions are a daily part of your dog's diet, the red blood cells may become fragile and break apart. This is due to the toxic ingredient in onions and garlic, thiosulphate. Signs can begin immediately after eating the onion or a few days later. Large quantities of garlic need to be ingested before signs of toxicity are seen. Severe anemias and even death can occur if the dog ingests lots of onions or garlic and receives no treatment.

All forms of onion and garlic are a problem. This includes raw, dehydrated, cooked, powders or those in foods. The most common source of onions for cats is in human baby food. Some baby foods have onion powder added for taste. When consistently fed baby food with added onion powder, signs of toxicity can develop. Many people use garlic pills as 'natural' flea control. The amount of garlic is low but if large amounts of the pills are ingested at one time, toxicity may occur.

**Xylitol (sugar sweetener)** Xylitol is a sugar-alcohol sweetener found in sugar-free human food products such as chewing gum, candy as well as other products. Dogs that eat significant amounts can develop a sudden drop in blood sugar, which can cause weakness, lethargy, loss of coordination, collapse and seizures.

Symptoms can begin in as little as 30 minutes and last hours. It is recommended that pets that experience symptoms be taken to a veterinarian or local emergency clinic for evaluation.

**Yeast Dough.** When ingested, bread or yeast dough will "rise" in the stomach just as it would for bread. As the dough rises and ferments, alcohol is produced. There are two problems with yeast dough. The biggest problem is that the dough often rises to many times its size, expanding the pet's stomach. The second problem is from the alcohol component, which can cause "alcohol toxicity." Symptoms of vomiting, retching, abdominal discomfort, lethargy, depression or bloat is possible.

**Legal Disclaimer** If your pet is showing any signs of distress or you suspect your pet is seriously ill, CONTACT YOUR VETERINARIAN immediately.

## Products Sweetened With Xylitol Can Be Toxic To Dogs

*By: Courtesy of ASPCA*

### **Xylitol Toxicity**

The ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center cautions animal owners that xylitol, a sweetener found in certain sugar-free chewing gums, candies, baked goods and other products can potentially cause serious and even life-threatening problems for pets.

"Last year, we managed more than 170 cases involving xylitol-containing products," says Dana Farbman, CVT and spokesperson for the Center. "This is a significant increase from 2004, when we managed about 70." Barely halfway into 2006, the Center has already managed about 114 cases. Why the increase? "It's difficult to say," Farbman states. "Xylitol products are relatively new to the United States marketplace, so one possibility may be an increase in availability."

According to Dr. Eric Dunayer, veterinarian and toxicologist for the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center, dogs ingesting significant amounts of items sweetened with xylitol could develop a fairly sudden drop in blood sugar, resulting in depression, loss of coordination and seizures. "These signs can develop quite rapidly, at times less than 30 minutes after ingestion of the product. Therefore, it is crucial that pet owners seek veterinary treatment immediately." Dr. Dunayer also stated that there appears to be a strong link between xylitol ingestions and the development of liver failure in dogs.

While it was previously thought that only large concentrations of xylitol could result in problems, this appears to no longer be the case. "We seem to be learning new information with each subsequent case we manage," says Dr. Dunayer. "Our concern used to be mainly with products that contain xylitol as one of the first ingredients. However, we have begun to see problems developing from ingestions of products with lesser amounts of this sweetener." He also says that with smaller concentrations of xylitol, the onset of clinical signs could be delayed as much as 12 hours after ingestion. "Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that even if your pet does not develop signs right away, it does not mean that problems won't develop later on."

The ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center strongly urges pet owners to be especially diligent in keeping candy, gum or other foods containing xylitol out of the reach of pets. As with any potentially toxic substance, should accidental exposures occur, it is important to contact your local veterinarian or the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center for immediate assistance.

**Legal Disclaimer** If your pet is showing any signs of distress or you suspect your pet is seriously ill, CONTACT YOUR VETERINARIAN immediately.