

CHOCOLATE TOXICITY IN DOGS

We've all experienced the tug on the heart strings that the big pleading eyes of our dog produces when they watch us eat. The looks always seem more pathetic when eating chocolate.

For the sake of your dog's health, don't give in. Eating chocolate, even in relatively small quantities, is dangerous for your dog.

WHY IS CHOCOLATE TOXIC FOR DOGS?

Chocolate contains a substance called theobromine, which occurs naturally in the cocoa beans used to make chocolate. It is related to caffeine (both are members of a class of substances called methylxanthines) and has similar stimulant effects. Caffeine can produce symptoms of toxicity in dogs and is also present in chocolate but in relatively small quantities.

The reason that theobromine is toxic for dogs is that their bodies can't break down and excrete it efficiently in the way that humans can, so the effects can persist for many hours or even days.

HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

Unfortunately there is no very simple answer to that question. Several factors are involved: the size of the dog, the type of chocolate (essentially the darker the chocolate the greater the amount of theobromine), and individual sensitivity to methylxanthines.

The following list gives an approximate guide to how many standard squares of different types of chocolate would be likely to be cause symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhoea in a 10 kg dog, for example an average-sized spaniel. Logically the smaller the dog the smaller the amount of chocolate tolerated.

White chocolate - 200 squares

Milk chocolate – 3 squares

Dark chocolate – 1 ½ squares

Cooking chocolate – ½ square

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CHOCOLATE TOXICITY?

If your dog has eaten too much chocolate you may see some or all of the following symptoms:

- vomiting,
- diarrhoea,
- restlessness and/or disorientation,
- muscle twitching,
- excessive panting
- increased urination.

If a dog has eaten a very large quantity, it may experience seizures followed by coma and in extreme circumstances, death.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOUR DOG EATS TOO MUCH CHOCOLATE?

Contacting your vet immediately is the best course of action.

The best treatment for chocolate toxicity is to remove the chocolate from the body before the theobromine can cause problems. Any extra information you can provide to the vet will be valuable. If possible, find the packet of the chocolate that has been eaten and try to estimate the amount eaten and what time it occurred.

If it is within a few hours of the chocolate being eaten and if your dog has either no or only very mild symptoms of toxicity the vet will give a medicine that causes vomiting and so hopefully prevent any symptoms from occurring.

If your dog is showing more severe signs of toxicity, such as muscle twitching, it is likely that it will need to stay in the vet hospital on a drip and be given some medicines to treat the effects of the chocolate. Because dogs are not able to clear theobromine from their bodies very quickly, the signs may persist for up to 72 hours so in the most severe cases your dog may have to be hospitalised for a few days.

PREVENTION

Chocolate toxicity is a problem far better avoided than treated. Take care not to leave chocolate lying around and always store it out of reach of your dog. They will find it very palatable and are highly likely to eat any they are able to get their paws on. And like many people, they don't learn from the experience of eating too much!