

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: Winter is here and I was wondering about how to keep my pet safe during these winter months. Do you have any tips for me?

Answer: Whether or not snow actually falls in your area, many people will gather for traditional holiday parties. With all of the delicious smells and exciting new people, our pets may take advantage of a stranger's generosity or an unattended plate in order to help themselves to the appetizers. However natural it is to share with our pets, there are a few foods that should be avoided. These foods include:

- Excessively salty foods
- Sweets and chocolate
- Foods with onion or onion powder
- Excessively fatty foods
- Grapes and raisins
- Poultry bones
- Alcohol or eggnog

Chocolate and sweets deserve special mention due to their abundance during this time of year. Some candies and foods that are artificially sweetened with the ingredient, xylitol, can actually cause a rapid decrease in blood sugar of dogs and has even been implicated in some liver failure cases.

Chocolate is a well-known toxic for dogs, but baking chocolate and the semi-sweet varieties are much more dangerous, causing heart problems, vomiting, and even death. And, it should go without saying that pets should never be given any alcoholic beverage.

In our quest to decorate and create a cheerful atmosphere, we often will use various plants. Almost any member of the lily family can be deadly to cats and other holiday foliage, such as mistletoe and holly, can also cause severe stomach upset to our pets. Interestingly, poinsettias are actually over-rated with respect to toxicity. Most pets who ingest a poinsettia leaf may have mild irritation of the mouth and/or stomach.

Artificial decorations can be just as bad. To a cat, a ribbon or strand of tinsel can be too much of a temptation. These long string-like objects can be swallowed and cause major problems in the intestines and stomach. Electric cords can cause electrocution or severe burns if chewed upon and many glass ornaments or lights can be easily broken and cut your pet's feet or mouth.

Beyond the dangers indoors, the outdoor world may be just as bad. One of the most common poisonings of pets during the winter months is a case of ingested car anti-freeze. Its pleasant, sweet taste masks a deadly poison that can kill with very small amounts. If you even suspect that your pet has consumed anti-freeze, you need to contact your veterinarian or nearest emergency hospital immediately! Rat and mouse poisons, as well as ice melting products should be used with care around any pets.

Pets can suffer the effects of frostbite and hypothermia just as easily as their owners. Household pets should stay indoors in very cold temperatures. But if your pet must stay outdoors, be sure to provide them shelter from the wind and moisture. In this case, bigger is not better! Smaller homes will help to trap body heat more efficiently. Use heated water bowls and replenish everyday.

Knowing your pet's limitations will be very important during these months. An older dog may not be as sure-footed on the ice and young puppies may not have enough body fat to keep them warm for extended periods in the snow. Monitor your pets when they go out for exercise or for their "bathroom breaks" to insure that they are able to make it back on their own. In addition, the added excitement and presence of strangers in the house may be too much for some excitable pets. Find a quiet room for their kennel and make time for them after your guests have left.

Wintertime can be glorious and full of family fun. It does not have to involve a visit to the animal emergency room if a few simple precautions are taken. Talk to your family veterinarian about a winter "check-up" for your pet and how to avoid a winter catastrophe.

If you have a question, write Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Avenue, Suite 405, Indianapolis, IN, 46225, or [www.invma.org](http://www.invma.org)