

VET RECORD

Risk of chocolate poisoning in dogs peaks at Christmas, warn experts

Dog owners need to be particularly vigilant about chocolate over the festive period

Experts are warning of a “significant peak” in the risk of chocolate poisoning in dogs over the Christmas period as households stock up on festive treats.

In the **Vet Record** today, researchers at the University of Liverpool say dog owners need to be aware of the heightened risk, particularly in the run up to Christmas - and to a lesser extent Easter - as chocolate becomes more accessible within the home.

Chocolate contains theobromine (a stimulant similar to caffeine) that can cause vomiting, increased heart rate, agitation and seizure in dogs.

Although chocolate has long been recognised as, and remains a common cause of intoxication in dogs, the team wanted to investigate whether chocolate exposure followed any sort of seasonal pattern.

They therefore analysed records from 229 UK veterinary practices between 2012 and 2017 for consultations relating to chocolate exposure around Christmas, Easter, Valentine’s Day and Halloween.

After taking account of potentially influential factors, such as dog’s age, gender and breed, 386 cases from 375 individual animals were included.

One in four cases (101, 26%) presented within one hour of eating chocolate and over half (217, 56%) presented within six hours.

Vomiting was frequently noted (64 cases, 17%), while heart rate above 120 bpm was noted in 28 cases (7.5%). Neurological signs (agitation, restlessness) were uncommon (12 cases, 3%) and seizures were not reported in any cases. None of the clinical signs seen were considered life-threatening.

Chocolate exposure was less common in older dogs (aged 4 to 8 years or more) than dogs under 4 years of age. No particular breed was associated with an increased risk.

Chocolate exposure was more than four times as likely to be recorded at Christmas - and almost twice as likely to be recorded at Easter - than non-festival dates. There were no peaks seen around Valentine’s Day or Halloween.

Sources of chocolate included bars and boxes (often gift selections), Easter eggs, chocolate cake, liqueurs, chocolate rabbits, Santa Claus figurines, Advent calendars and Christmas tree decorations.

While chocolate doses were often small, exceptions included eating a garden of Easter eggs hidden for a large party of children.

“Here we describe significant peaks of chocolate intoxication, most notably at Christmas and to a lesser extent Easter presumably reflecting the enhanced availability of seasonally-related chocolate such as Easter-eggs, chocolate Santa Claus figurines and Christmas tree decorations, possibly in the hands of younger members of society,” write the authors.

Chocolate ingestion has a unique seasonal pattern, they conclude, “which merits highlighting this risk to clients, particularly in the run up to Christmas and Easter as chocolate becomes more accessible within the household.”