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## Household Hazards – Toxic Hazards for Cats

Many think that because cats are finicky eaters they are poisoned less often than dogs. However, with their curiosity and fastidious grooming, intoxication is, unfortunately, not uncommon. Several factors predispose cats to becoming ill once they have been exposed to even a small amount of a poisonous substance.

**"Cats lack certain liver enzymes which affects their liver metabolism, making them more sensitive to drugs and chemicals."**

These include their small body size, their habit of hiding when ill so that exposure is not immediately evident, and their lack of certain liver enzymes which affects their liver metabolism, making them more sensitive to drugs and chemicals. When cats are poisoned, these factors make them more sensitive to poisonings than dogs.

### How can a cat become poisoned?

Cats can be poisoned via a number of routes. Contamination of the digestive system can result from the direct ingestion of a toxic substance, from ingestion of poisoned prey, or from grooming contaminated fur. Some toxins can be absorbed directly through the skin, particularly the paws, and a few toxins can cause damage by inhalation. As cats are fastidious groomers, any skin or hair exposure can quickly result in the poison being ingested as a result of grooming.

### What clinical signs might warn me that my cat may have been poisoned?

The signs vary depending on the particular poison concerned. Toxins may produce:

- Gastrointestinal signs such as drooling, lack of appetite, vomiting and diarrhea
- Neurological signs including hiding, excitability, incoordination, tremors, seizures, lethargy or coma
- Respiratory signs such as coughing, sneezing, or difficult breathing
- Skin signs of redness, inflammation and swelling
- Liver failure that causes lack of appetite, vomiting, dehydration, jaundice, diarrhea and weight loss
- Kidney failure that may show as lack of appetite, vomiting, halitosis (bad breath), increased drinking and urination, decreased drinking and urination, and weight loss

Some toxins act on more than one body system, and can produce any combination of the above signs. It is important to remember that, while most cases of intoxication will cause acute (sudden) problems, chronic, delayed intoxication can also arise (albeit more rarely). Chronic exposure to toxins can be very difficult to recognize and treat.

## I think my cat has been poisoned. What should I do?

If you suspect your cat may have had access to a poisonous substance, it is important to contact your veterinarian or Pet Poison Helpline or seek veterinary care as soon as possible. If the cat is anxious and aggressive, it is usually best to wrap it in a towel and put it in a box to prevent it from hurting itself or you.

**"Wrapping in a towel also prevents the cat from ingesting further contamination from its coat. "**

Wrapping in a towel also prevents the cat from ingesting further contamination from its coat. It is NOT advisable to try to make the cat vomit, since no home products effectively result in vomiting in cats. Only veterinarians can medically induce vomiting with injectable medications. It is best to call the veterinary hospital while you are en route to let them know you are coming, and allow them time to prepare any treatments your cat may need.

## My cat has some 'chemical' on its coat. What should I do?

You should only attempt home treatment when the contamination is mild and is confined to the coat. The aim of treatment is to prevent absorption through the skin or internal ingestion of the substance.

**"It is important to remove as much of the contamination as possible prior to washing, since the process of washing can increase the absorption of some chemicals."**

Remove the cat's collar as it may also have been contaminated. When in doubt, if you cannot safely bathe your cat without getting injured, it's always safest to bring your cat directly to the veterinarian to allow for proper restraint. To remove chemicals from a cat's coat, it is best to clip off contaminated hair (using clippers, never scissors or anything that can damage or injure you or your pet!) and then wash the cat in a liquid dish soap (used to wash dishes in the sink). It is important to remove as much of the contamination as possible prior to washing, since the process of washing can increase the absorption of some chemicals. After any potential exposure to poisons, it is advisable to keep the cat indoors for 24 hours for observation. Keep it in a warm, quiet room. If your cat shows any symptoms, seek veterinary attention immediately.

## What should I do if my cat has swallowed some of this chemical?

If you feel your cat may have swallowed a toxin, contact your veterinarian or Pet Poison Helpline (800-213-6680) to determine if the product was poisonous at all. When in doubt, seek immediate veterinary care. Even if the contamination was confined to the coat, many chemicals and toxins can still be absorbed across the skin or groomed off the skin and orally ingested. Do not try to induce vomiting at home, or begin any home remedies without consultation from a vet or Pet Poison Helpline.



## What sort of things can poison cats?

According to data from Pet Poison Helpline, an animal poison control based out of Minneapolis, the top five cat toxins of 2010 include:

- 1) Human or veterinary drugs

- 2) Poisonous plants
- 3) Insecticides
- 4) Household cleaners
- 5) Other toxins, such as glow sticks and liquid potpourri

**Human and veterinary medications** – During 2010, about 40 percent of feline cases at Pet Poison Helpline involved cats that improperly ingested human or veterinary drugs. Cats have difficulty metabolizing certain drugs, especially as compared to dogs and humans. Common drugs such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) are some of the most deadly to cats. When ingested, NSAIDs can result in severe kidney failure and stomach ulcers. Likewise, one acetaminophen (Tylenol®) tablet can be fatal to a cat, as it results in damage to red blood cells. Untreated, it can cause severe anemia (low red blood cell count), difficulty breathing, a swollen face, liver failure and death. Cats also seem to like the taste of certain antidepressants (e.g., Effexor), which seem to contain an attractive smell or flavor in the coating. With any accidental medication ingestion, immediate veterinary care is imperative.

**Plants** – Poisonous plants were the second most common cat toxin in 2010, representing about 14 percent of feline-related calls. True lilies (*Lilium* and *Heimerocallis* spp.), including the Tiger, Day, Asiatic, Easter and Japanese Show lilies, are among the most deadly and cause kidney failure in cats. Because these flowers are fragrant, inexpensive and long-lasting, florists often include them in arrangements. Small ingestions of two or three petals or leaves – even the pollen – can result in severe, potentially irreversible kidney failure. Immediate veterinary care is imperative. Despite their name, other plants such as the Peace, Peruvian and Calla lily are not true lilies and do not cause kidney failure. Instead, these plants contain oxalate crystals that can cause minor symptoms, such as irritation in the mouth, tongue, throat and esophagus.

**Insecticides** – Nine percent of feline-related calls in 2010 were for cats exposed to household insecticides or cats inappropriately treated with a topical flea and tick medication meant for dogs. Exposure to household insecticides such as lawn and garden products, sprays, powders, or granules often occurs when a cat walks through a treated area; however, serious poisoning is rare. More concerning is exposure to concentrated topical flea and tick medications meant for dogs. Dog-specific insecticides containing pyrethrins or pyrethroids are highly toxic to cats. Poisoning occurs when pet owners apply such products directly to cats or cats lick these medications off dogs that live with them. Severe drooling, tremors and life-threatening seizures can occur. Always read labels carefully before using any kind of insecticide and ask your veterinarian about appropriate topical flea and tick medications for your cat.

**Household Cleaners** – Exposure to household cleaners accounted for approximately six percent of feline-related calls to Pet Poison Helpline in 2010. Many cat owners don't realize that some common household cleaners like kitchen and bath surface cleaners, carpet cleaners and toilet bowl cleaners can be toxic to cats. Symptoms can include profuse drooling, difficulty breathing, vomiting, and even organ damage. After cleaning your home, make sure all excess liquid or residue is wiped up or eliminated, and stow the products out of your cat's reach as soon as possible. Only allow your cat back into the cleaned areas after the products have completely dried.

**Other Toxins** – The remainder of feline-related calls during 2010 involved less obvious toxins, such as glow sticks and liquid potpourri. Glow sticks and jewelry contain a very bitter tasting liquid called dibutyl phthalate. While rarely deadly, just one bite into these items can cause your cat to drool profusely. Most of these exposures can be managed at home. Offer (but do not force) your cat chicken broth or canned tuna (in water, not oil), to help to remove the bitter taste from the mouth. Remove the glow sticks and clean up any remaining liquid to prevent re-exposure to cats, who may continue to groom it off their fur. A bath may be in order to remove any “glowing” liquid from his or her skin. If you see signs of redness to the eyes, squinting, continued drooling, or not eating, a trip to the veterinarian may be necessary.

\*Pet Poison Helpline, is an animal poison control service available 24 hours, seven days a week for pet owners and veterinary professionals who require assistance treating a potentially poisoned pet – including birds! Pet Poison Helpline is available in North America by calling 800-213-6680. Additional information can be found online at [www.petpoisonhelpline.com](http://www.petpoisonhelpline.com). Pet Poison Helpline is not directly affiliated with LifeLearn.



*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM*

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