

Primary Cause of Pet Poisonings: Human Drugs

ASPCA offers safety tips to protect cats and dogs.

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Common over-the-counter medications such as ibuprofen and acetaminophen can be toxic to cats and dogs. The most common cause of household poisonings in cats and dogs is from the ingestion of human drugs, according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

In 2007, the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center handled 89,000 cases of pets exposed to prescription and over-the-counter human medications. Cats and dogs can easily grab pill vials from counters and nightstands or eat pills found on the floor.

ASPCA experts urge pet owners to be aware of the following health hazards: Pets are ultra-sensitive to anti-inflammatory medications like ibuprofen and naproxen, which can cause stomach and intestinal ulcers and kidney damage in cats. Antidepressants can trigger vomiting, lethargy and a condition called serotonin syndrome. Acetaminophen is especially toxic to cats, and can damage red blood cells and interfere with oxygen flow. Pseudoephedrine is a decongestant found in many cold remedies, but acts like a stimulant in cats and dogs, who can experience elevated heart rates and seizures.

Dr. Helen Myers, ASPCA veterinary toxicologist, advises pet owners to keep drugs in a cabinet. "And consider taking your pills in a bathroom, so if you drop one, you can shut the door and prevent your pet from accessing the room until the medication is found," she said.

Myers also recommends learning the name, dosage and quantity of all prescriptions should an accident occur. For example, if you keep several medications in a bottle in your purse, put in a known amount. "So if your dog gets into the bottle, you know what the worst-case scenario is," she said.

If your pet does swallow any pills, stay calm and try to assess how many are left in the bottle versus how many might have been consumed. This information is crucial for veterinarians when assigning a pet's risk level and determining a proper course of treatment.

In the event that a pet swallows human medications or other toxic substance, call a veterinarian or the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center's 24-hour hotline at (888) 426-4435. To read the ASPCA expert's top 10 list of dangerous drugs, visit APCC online.