

Surprising Foods Pets Can and Can't Consume: Holiday Edition

By Andrea Vardaro Tucker, ELS



“Food is the focal point of many holiday celebrations,” says Dr. Tina Wismer, senior director of the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center. Unfortunately, this makes the holidays prime time for food-related toxicities in pets. Some of the foods most toxic to pets are holiday staples, and other factors, like guests visiting, bring added risks.

Let’s dive in to a holiday smorgasbord to test your knowledge of some surprising human foods healthy pets *can* eat and less obvious foods that can make them sick (or worse).

TRUE OR FALSE?

See if you know which statements are fact and which are fiction.

1 Nuts of all kinds make great holiday treats for pets.

FALSE. Although some nuts aren’t toxic, they’re best avoided. Nuts such as walnuts, almonds, and pecans are full of fat and oils, so they can cause gastrointestinal (GI) upset and pancreatitis, which can be life-threatening. Macadamia nuts, often hidden in holiday cookies, are an even greater danger, potentially resulting in lethargy and weakness, diarrhea, vomiting, and tremors.

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2 Some fruits are dangerous for pets.

TRUE. Pets should never eat grapes or raisins. Experts don't know *why* grapes and their shriveled counterparts hurt some dogs and cats, but eating them can result in kidney damage or failure.

Also avoid feeding citrus fruits to pets. In large amounts, citric acid can irritate and potentially depress pets' central nervous systems.

Pets should get most of their nutrition from their regular diet, but if you'd like to slip them a fruity reward, apples, bananas, blueberries, cantaloupe, pineapple, strawberries, and watermelon (in small portions) can be good options, as is plain canned (cooked) pumpkin. Cut harder fruits into bite-size pieces, and remove seeds, cores, stems, and peels/rinds. Especially if your pet has any health conditions, like diabetes or obesity, check with your veterinarian for personalized recommendations.

3 Raw foods are dangerous for pets (and people).

TRUE. This of course applies to obvious foods like raw meats and eggs that can carry *Salmonella* and *Escherichia coli*. But one lesser-known danger of raw foods for pets is the uncooked dough prevalent during prime baking season. "Yeast dough can rise and cause gas to accumulate in your pet's digestive system. This can be painful and can cause the stomach to bloat, and potentially twist, becoming a life-threatening emergency," Dr. Wismer says. And there's one more surprising effect of pets consuming uncooked yeast: "The yeast produce ethanol as a by-product, and a pet ingesting raw bread dough can become drunk."

4 Because of the antioxidants it contains, dark chocolate is healthiest for pets.

FALSE. Although dark chocolate is touted for potential health benefits for

people, it, along with baker's chocolate, is actually more dangerous for pets than white and milk chocolate. Dark chocolate has higher levels of *methylxanthines* (theobromine and caffeine), which, if ingested, can lead to vomiting, diarrhea, panting, increased thirst and urination, hyperactivity, and tremors and seizures. Consuming chocolate can even be fatal, depending on the size of the pet and the amount and type of chocolate. In addition, pets should be kept away from cocoa powder and cocoa beans, which also contain methylxanthines.

5 Milk is the best drink you can offer your cat.

FALSE. Milk isn't toxic, but it can cause digestive tract disturbances and diarrhea because most cats (and dogs) don't have high enough levels of lactase to process dairy. While we're talking about beverages, most of what you and your guests imbibe should be kept out of your pet's reach. "Under no circumstances should your pet be given any alcohol," Dr. Wismer cautions. In some cases, pets who drink alcohol or eat foods containing it can die. Caffeinated beverages, including coffee and some teas and sodas, can cause heart rhythm abnormalities, seizures, and death. To be safe, just stick to water for pets.

6 Artificial sweeteners are a healthier alternative to sugar for pets.

FALSE. Of course skipping sugar is ideal when it comes to pets. But the artificial sweetener xylitol is even worse. Ingesting it can be deadly for pets, and, at the very least, it can cause low blood sugar, lethargy, loss of coordination, seizures, and liver failure. Xylitol's often a hidden danger, lurking in store-bought sugar-free baked goods, sugarless chewing gum, candy, mints, some peanut butters, and even toothpaste.

*Both green beans and zucchini are botanically fruits, and peas are technically seeds, but we've left them in the vegetable category because they tend to be treated as vegetables.

7 Use caution if giving your pet vegetables.

TRUE. Not all vegetables are created equal for pets.

"Since vegetables are low in fat and calories, they are a great snack for your furry friend," Dr. Wismer says. She suggests offering pets unseasoned (plain) carrots, celery, cauliflower, peas, green beans, and zucchini.* For cats especially, these should be cooked. Like fruits, veggies are best served in small portions and bite-size pieces.

Some vegetables and herbs, including chives, garlic, onions, shallots, and leeks, should be completely off-limits to cats and dogs because they can cause anemia and kidney damage.

8 Table scraps will spoil your pet, but they aren't unhealthy.

FALSE. Sure, tossing your pet some scraps while you're cooking or eating might encourage begging, but the bigger threat is to your pet's health. Dr. Wismer says "fatty, spicy human foods, as well as bones, should not be fed to your furry friends." These foods may cause GI disturbances and trigger pancreatitis, and bones could damage pets' teeth, pose a choking hazard, and harm their digestive tract.

However, "while we recommend sticking to your pet's normal diet on holidays, we understand that even our furry friends can't resist the smell of a delicious turkey or other festive dishes," Dr. Wismer says. "Small amounts of lean cooked chicken, turkey, beef, or pork that are free of bones and seasoning are OK. It is best to avoid processed meats like lunch meat or bacon, as they can be high in salt."

We hope this quiz helps you keep your pet safer and happier this holiday season and throughout the year.



Getting Help

If your pet ate something they shouldn't have, or if you notice they have GI upset, diarrhea, or vomiting, contact your pet's vet right away. You can also call the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center 24/7 at **888-426-4435** (a fee may be charged).

For an extensive list of foods to avoid feeding your pets, visit aspca.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control/people-foods-avoid-feeding-your-pets.

Andrea Vardaro Tucker's 12-year-old Westie was born on Christmas Eve, which gives the whole family extra reason to celebrate—and play it safe with holiday foods during their celebrations.

Other Risks

We all know that pets eat, drink, and investigate things that aren't technically food. Here's a list of other holiday-related, nonfood items in the house to keep pets away from:

- Toxic plants like lilies, holly, and oleander
- Unsecured Christmas trees and stagnant tree water
- Loose electric and extension cords and strands of holiday lights
- Candles and menorahs
- Ornaments and other decorations (including tinsel)
- Visiting guests' medications (including cannabis)



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VET SPOTLIGHT

"Several years ago, my husband and I had an aging 17-year-old rescued black Lab mix named Annie. Our regular veterinarian had just retired, and our best friend needed help. I called several vets for an appointment. Dr. Maryann Milford of Paw Prints Veterinary Hospital answered her telephone, and we were given an appointment. Her knowledge and care of our old dog Annie was so reassuring.

Unfortunately, a short time later, it was time to say goodbye to our best friend. We drove to Paw Prints, and being the compassionate and caring woman we have come to learn she is, Dr. Milford came out of her office and crawled on the deck of our SUV, and we all lovingly said goodbye to our precious family member Annie there.

Then, a year or so later, Dr. Milford saved a senior dog who needed a forever home. To our delight, Dr. Milford called us to ask if we were interested, then picked us. My husband and I adopted Princess Biscuit, a 16-year-old Golden Retriever/Chow mix. I know Paw Prints Veterinary Hospital is a very busy practice, but Dr. Milford seems to remember and keep track of her pets' families.



My husband and I are in our 80s and still active, as are our senior animals. With all of us being seniors, we have our senior medical issues. Since our best buddies cannot verbally communicate, I call Paw Prints frequently for interpretation of my dog's behavior and symptoms. It doesn't matter if I call once a month, twice a week, or 3 times a day, they talk to me like I'm a long-lost friend. I have to commend Dr. Milford and staff for their patience and kindness toward the older generation. I know of other seniors who use Dr. Milford's office and feel the exact same way.

As you can imagine, there are differences between having a pet when you are young versus in your golden years. When you're young, you can pick up your pet, put them in the car, and drive

Dr. Maryann Milford
*Paw Prints Veterinary Hospital,
Flemington, New Jersey*

*Thanks to Betty Lee McPherson
from Pittstown, NJ, for sharing this
heartwarming story.*

to the office. I did that years ago, but when you get to the golden years, there are times you need help getting your pet into the car, and there are times when you may even need someone to drive.

The moral of this story: I am just so thankful I have Dr. Milford and staff who are so understanding of all of our situations. They are always willing to accommodate us and provide our special family members with the very best medical care.

Thank you, Dr. Milford and staff at Paw Prints Veterinary Hospital. I am fur-ever grateful."

To share your story, see the inside back cover (after Your Cute Pets).

Paw Prints Veterinary Hospital, Cindy Quick