

# Chocolate and Your Pets

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

Aaahh, chocolate! It's one of everyone's favorite foods. We just can't seem to get enough! Chocolate is also very tasty to dogs, though not so tasty to cats, but we all know that cats are more picky.



Chocolate comes from the beans of a plant called *Theobroma cacao*. The Greek word *Theobroma* literally means "food of the gods." Many ancient cultures used chocolate in their most sacred religious ceremonies. Chocolate contains a substance called theobromine, a potent stimulant that is chemically similar to caffeine. The stimulant effect was thought to be a sign that those who indulged were coming closer to their deities.

Though it may be the food of the gods, chocolate is very toxic to your pets. Dogs who eat too much chocolate may vomit at first and/or have diarrhea. If enough of the chocolate is absorbed, the dog may start to show signs of hyperactivity, panting, pacing, restlessness or muscle tremors. With all the stimulant effects comes a very rapid heartbeat and even seizures, both of which can be fatal.

Chocolate poisoning is among the most common types of poisonings reported by national animal poison-control centers, probably because any form of chocolate is attractive to dogs and it is readily available. Poisoning is more common around holiday times, when chocolate products and candies are more likely to be left out.

Baking chocolate is the most deadly form of chocolate because it is the most concentrated form. The next most toxic form is semisweet chocolate, followed by milk chocolate, hot chocolate or chocolate milk, and white chocolate. Also, the more expensive the chocolate product, the more "real" chocolate it contains and thus the more toxic it is. So if your dog consumes a Snickers bar, it's probably less harmful than if he eats a box of imported French truffles! Keep in mind, however, that a mere four ounces of baking chocolate or one pound of milk chocolate can be lethal for a 15-pound dog. It's not at all unusual for a dog to consume this amount in a single episode.

What do you do if Fido breaks into the candy box or steals the pan of brownies? Call your veterinarian or animal poison-control center immediately! The Pet Poison Hotline number is 800-565-5719. Be ready to relate the type of chocolate consumed and the amount, the time the ingestion occurred, and the approximate weight of the dog. You may be instructed on how to induce vomiting and how to monitor the dog's condition. A veterinarian should check the dog as soon as possible because treatment can be given to alleviate some of the symptoms and better insure a positive outcome.

Dogs do love chocolate, but be kind to your dog – save the chocolate treats for you and your sweetheart!

*Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends' chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie's Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.*