

Holiday Hazards for Pets

by Sherry Woodard

Though holidays can be a great time for people, they can be problematic for our pets. Here are some things to be aware of as you celebrate the holidays.



The Fourth of July

Fireworks can be very frightening for our pets. They may panic and try to escape the noise by attempting to leave the safety of their own house or yard. Here's how you can protect your animal family members on the fourth of July:

- Make sure they wear properly sized collars (no more than two fingers should fit under the collar). All dogs and cats (even house cats) should have current ID on their collars, and they should have microchip IDs as well. Cats should wear safety collars that will pop or stretch if they get caught on something.
- Keep your pets inside the house. If there will be a lot of people going in and out, you might want to put your animals in a bedroom with the door shut. Close the windows, curtains and shades so they will feel more safe and secure.
- You can muffle the sound of fireworks by turning on a fan, radio or television.

If your pet is extremely distressed during fireworks, she may become destructive and may even hurt herself trying to escape the noise. To calm her, you may need to stay with her and try to distract her with play or favorite things to chew. Do not verbally reassure a nervous pet, however, since that may reinforce her nervousness.

Do not put a frightened dog in a crate and leave the house. Though his crate may normally be a safe place for him, he may feel trapped in there if he's frightened by fireworks. He could injure himself badly trying to get out of the crate.

Halloween

Halloween is a fun day for humans, but pets may become spooked (no pun intended!) by the altered appearance of their families. If your dog does not appear to recognize you and your children, use caution when approaching him or her.

Candy can make your pets sick, so you should always keep it out of reach of your pets, but especially on this holiday, when there's so much of it around. You can encourage pet involvement in Halloween by making homemade dog and cat treats for your own animals and for other people's pets. (Make sure they're clearly labeled as pet treats!)

Some people like to dress up their pets for Halloween (or other holidays). Because wearing a costume might be uncomfortable or frightening to your pet, introduce the costume slowly. Start by taking the costume out of the packaging and allow it to air out. Costumes may have strong smells that pets can be sensitive to.

Lay the costume on the floor and allow all house pets to sniff it. If your pet avoids the costume, shows no interest, or is fearful, put treats or a favorite toy near the costume to make it a positive experience for your pet. If your pet walks up to the costume, praise him/her and provide treats.

Wait until your pet is comfortable with the costume before attempting to dress your pet. If you have multiple pets, put the pets who aren't going to dress up in a secured room. The reason for this is that your other pets may become stressed or fearful and have unexpected defensive behavior during the dressing-up process.

The process of dressing your pet should be done in steps and using repetition. If the costume has more than one piece, try one piece a day. For example, on the first day practice putting on the cape, and repeat. On the following day, practice putting on the hat and repeat. The next day, try putting on the cape and the hat. During this process, remember to provide praise, encouragement and treats. If your pet demonstrates fear, stress, and/or defensive behavior during the process, your pet may not be comfortable dressing up. Be respectful to your pet.

Finally, dogs and cats should be kept inside on Halloween. If a lot of people will be coming to your door, put your pets in a bedroom with the door shut to prevent them from escaping into the night. Keeping them in a closed room will also minimize the fright they might get from loud voices and wild costumes. Black cats are especially vulnerable on Halloween, since black cats are often associated with evil and misfortune, and they can be the victims of abuse. So, to keep them safe, keep them inside.

Christmas

Here are some tips for keeping pets safe at Christmas time:

- If you have a real Christmas tree, keep the water in the stand covered so your animals can't drink it. The pine sap is dangerous if ingested.
- Secure the tree to a wall or the ceiling with fishing line and a hook to prevent pets from knocking it over.
- Tree lights should not be left on when you're not around, since your pets may tangle themselves in the cords. Unplug the tree lights when you're not using them.
- Once you've decorated your tree, pick up all tinsel, ribbon and ornament hooks on the floor. These glittery items may be attractive playthings to your pets, but they can get sick if they ingest them. If a gastrointestinal blockage occurs, surgery may be needed to save your pet.
- If your pets express interest in playing with the decorations on the tree, decorate the bottom third of the tree with wood or plastic ornaments that won't break.
- Keep all gifts that contain human food off the floor so that pets are not tempted by the smells. Human treats can be dangerous for pets – especially food containing chocolate, alcohol, raisins and onions.
- Holiday plants such as poinsettias and mistletoe can be dangerous, too, if your pets chew on them. Keep holiday plants well out of reach of your pets, or buy artificial plants.

- Burning candles can also be a concern around this time of year. Put burning candles in places that are inaccessible to your pets and don't let candles burn unattended. Your cat can easily light herself on fire by brushing up against a burning candle or start a fire by tipping the candle over.

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