

Keep your pets safe this festive season

The festive season can be a busy time of year for humans, but it's also a very busy time for our companion animals. Summertime is often associated with holidays, social occasions and severe weather, all of which can pose risks to our furry, feathered and scaly friends.



Dr Anne Fawcett from the University of Sydney's School of Veterinary Science offers her advice for caring for your pets this festive season.

Festive social events are invariably associated with tasty foods, often placed within reach of companion animals, which, if not kept under observation, tend to help themselves. Unfortunately, many festive foods are potentially dangerous to pets.

Dangerous foods for pets

- Chocolate contains caffeine and theobromine, which are toxic and potentially fatal to dogs and cats. The darker the chocolate, the more toxic it is.
- Grapes, raisins and sultanas can cause irreversible kidney failure in dogs and need to be kept well out of reach. For the same reason, animals should not be fed or have access to mincemeat pies or fruit cakes/loafs.
- Fatty foods like cheese, ham, pork crackling, bacon, turkey skin, lamb, sausages and the gristle off your steak can lead to nasty diarrhoea but may also trigger life-threatening pancreatitis in some pets.
- Bones can cause constipation, especially if animals aren't used to eating these, and cooked bones can shatter, causing perforation of the intestines.
- Onions and garlic can be toxic to dogs and cats, and lead to life-threatening anaemia. Onion toxicity can occur in dogs who have ingested a single onion bhaji, or those who simply eat the onions off the barbecue (risking scalding in the process).
- Macadamia nuts are toxic to dogs and can cause dramatic clinical signs including blindness. In small dogs and cats, nuts can also cause gastrointestinal obstruction.
- Food scraps and garbage can be very tempting to dogs and cats. Double bag the rubbish and keep it well out of reach of pets, which have been known to eat kebab skewers, cutlery, plastic kitchen wrap and compost.

- Dietary change alone is enough to cause vomiting and diarrhoea in some pets. If you are taking your pets along with you on holidays or to parties, bring their regular diet.
- Ingestion of most parts of the lily plant, including flowers and leaves, can cause irreversible kidney damage in cats. Cats seen licking or eating lilies should be taken to a veterinarian as an emergency.
- Do not leave food gifts under the Christmas tree. Pets have been known to steal and unwrap food gifts.

Toxic tips

If you see your pet eat something that is potentially toxic, take them to your local or emergency veterinarian immediately as your vet may be able to induce vomiting. This can prevent surgery later on, but it needs to be done immediately as there is a short window of time (sometimes as little as 30 minutes) where this is effective.

If your pet ate a food item, bring any packaging with you. If it is a plant item, bring the plant or take a photo of the plant including flowers and leaves to assist in identification.

Chewing hazards

- Kebab sticks
- Cutlery coated in meaty juices on
- String off ham/turkey
- Tinsel
- Small toys
- Batteries



These can cause life-threatening gastrointestinal blockages. Take your pet to your local or emergency veterinarian within two to four hours to induce vomiting.

Lay off the hard stuff

Alcohol and recreational drugs are dangerous to companion animals and they should never be exposed to these substances. Animals could ingest these substances directly or groom them off their fur. If you suspect that your pet has been exposed to alcohol or drugs, take them to your local or emergency veterinarian immediately.

Festive anxiety in pets

The presence of unfamiliar humans in the house or yard, changes in routine, loud conversation or music, and fireworks can be very stressful for some dogs and cats.

- Never force pets to be social if they are not in the mood.
- Always allow pets a quiet escape where they can withdraw from social activities.

- Some pets may be better off staying home if you're going to someone else's place, or boarding if the party is coming to you.
- Pets with phobias of loud noises or fireworks may benefit from medication, but it needs to be given pre-emptively – see your vet if you suspect your pet suffers from anxiety.

Travelling with pets

- Some animals benefit from medication to prevent motion sickness. You will need a prescription from your vet. Organise a consultation before you travel.
- Don't feed pets a large meal immediately before travel.
- Make sure your pet's tick prevention is up to date. Use a reputable, APVMA (Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority) registered product that is proven to be effective.
- Find out the details of the nearest local and 24-hour emergency vets before you travel, so you know where to go in case of an emergency.
- Take a supply of your pet's regular food as dietary change can lead to gastrointestinal upsets.
- Ensure that your contact details are up to date on the NSW Companion Animal Registry, or the relevant State or Territory Registry if travelling interstate with your pet.



Prevent heat stress

According to the Australian Bureau of Meteorology, climate change has led to an increased frequency of “extreme heat events”. Dogs in particular are prone to heat stress, which can be fatal.

- Ensure all companion animals have unimpeded access to fresh water.
- Ensure all companion animals have access to shade throughout the day (remember that shade moves).
- Exercise dogs only in the cooler parts of the day (early morning or late evening), and don't over-exert them (dogs are not the best judges of when they need to slow down and can die from heat stress secondary to over-exertion).

- Flatter-faced “brachycephalic” breeds, such as pugs and bulldogs, are at particular risk and should be kept indoors, in a cool environment.
- Never leave animals unattended in motor vehicles, or on the back of cars like utes.
- Avoid walking dogs on hot roads/footpaths as these can cause burns to the paw pads.



Smoke from bushfires

With bushfire smoke an almost daily reality for many Australians this summer, considering how you exercise your pet or expose them to the smoke is important.

- Dogs need regular exercise, but during high smoke and smoke haze days keep this to a minimum. Aim for ‘clean air’ breaks.
- Avoid exercising your pet outdoors at the peak of any smoke incidents.
- Be aware of any pets with pre-existing airway conditions or heart disease. They are particularly vulnerable to the effects of smoke.
- For animals in hutches or aviaries, it is important they are kept well-ventilated.
- Ensure you regularly change your pets’ water supply, which can be contaminated with ash.
- Wash your pets more regularly, as the ash can stick to feathers and fur.
- If your pet is displaying signs of struggling with smoke, take them to the vet.

