



Toxic Hazards

It is sometimes said that because cats are finicky eaters they are less easily poisoned than dogs. However, with their curiosity and fastidious grooming, intoxication is, unfortunately, not uncommon. Several factors predispose cats to becoming ill once they have been exposed to even a small amount of a poisonous substance. These include their small body size, their habit of hiding when ill so that exposure is not immediately evident, and their lack of certain liver enzymes necessary to decontaminate many chemicals. When cats are poisoned, these factors also make them less likely to recover than dogs.

How can a cat become poisoned?

Cats can be poisoned via a number of routes. Contamination of the digestive system can result from the direct ingestion of a toxic substance, ingestion of poisoned prey, or from grooming contaminated fur. Some toxins can be absorbed through the skin of the cat, particularly the paws, and a few toxins can cause damage by inhalation.



What clinical signs might warn me that my cat may have been poisoned?

The clinical signs are variable and will depend on the particular poison concerned. Many toxins produce:

- Gastrointestinal signs such as vomiting and diarrhea
- Neurological signs including tremors, incoordination, seizures, excitability, depression, or coma
- Respiratory signs such as coughing, sneezing, or difficult breathing
- Skin signs of redness, inflammation and swelling
- Liver failure that causes jaundice and vomiting
- Kidney failure that may be evidenced as increased drinking, inappetence and weight loss

Some toxins act on more than one body system, and can produce any combination of the above signs. It is important to remember that, while most cases of intoxication will cause acute problems, chronic, delayed intoxication can also arise. Chronic exposure to toxins can be very difficult to recognize and treat.

I think my cat has been poisoned, what should I do?

If you suspect your cat may have had access to a poisonous substance, it is important that it be taken to a veterinary hospital as soon as possible. If the cat is fractious it is usually best to wrap it in a towel and put it in a box to prevent it from hurting itself or you. Wrapping in a towel also prevents the cat from ingesting further contamination from its coat. It is **NOT** advisable to try to make the cat vomit, since the cat may asphyxiate or choke on its vomitus. It is best to call the veterinary hospital to tell them that you are coming and give them time to prepare any treatments your cat may need.

My cat has got something 'chemical' on its coat, what should I do?

Your cat can only be treated at home when the contamination is mild and is confined to the coat. The aim of treatment is to prevent further contamination.

External contamination – The cat's collar should be removed as it may also have been contaminated, and some flea collars contain chemicals that may be harmful to sick cats. To remove chemicals from the coat it is best to clip off contaminated hair and then wash the cat in warm soapy water. It is important to remove as much of the contamination as possible prior to washing, since the process of washing can increase the absorption of some chemicals. The cat must then be fully dried to prevent it from chilling. Oily material can be removed by rubbing it with clean, warm cooking oil, then wiping it off thoroughly (the principle here is that one oil can dilute and remove another oil).

Internal contamination – If you feel the cat may have **swallowed ANY** toxin it should be **immediately** taken to the veterinarian. Even if the contamination has been confined to the coat, many chemicals and toxins can still be absorbed across the skin. The cat should be encouraged to drink plenty of water or milk since this will help to wash out any absorbed toxins.

After any potential exposure to poisons it is advisable to keep the cat inside for 24 hours for observation. Keep it in a warm, quiet room.

What sort of things can poison cats?

Many everyday items are potentially hazardous to your cat. It is important that you are aware of these chemicals to help prevent an accident. The majority of reported cases involve household chemicals, insecticides and rodenticides (rat or mouse poisons).



Domestic hazards can be found in the garage (antifreeze, fuels), under the kitchen sink (acids, alkalis, bleach, disinfectants) or in the building itself (wood preservatives, lead-based paints). Intoxication can result from human medications (aspirin, acetaminophen, paracetamol, and antidepressants), certain foods (liver, onions, cocoa, raw fish), food contaminants (bacteria, fungi) or food additives (propylene glycol). **Never** give human medications to cats without checking with your veterinarian.

Garden hazards include rodenticides (warfarin and related substances, calciferol, strychnine, bromethalin), herbicides (sodium chlorate, paraquat), fungicides (pentachlorophenols or PCP), insecticides (pyrethrins, pyrethroids, organophosphates, carbamates, organochlorines), and molluscicides (slug bait - metaldehyde). Certain plants (mushrooms, marijuana, and pine needles) and animals (common toad, snakes and stinging insects) can be toxic to cats.

Endogenous toxins are toxins that are produced within the body. These toxins include urea in kidney failure and ammonia with congenital porto-systemic shunts (the presence of abnormal blood vessels within the liver). While these are not classically considered as poisons, they can cause similar clinical signs.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM
© Copyright 2005 Lifelearn Inc. Used with permission under license. July 25, 2014*