

Chocolate Poisoning

Chocolate poisoning in dogs

The cause of the poisoning is theobromine, found in the cocoa solids from which chocolate is made, as well as in cocoa powder, cocoa beans and more recently some garden mulches. As little as 100mg theobromine per kg of your pet dog can be fatal. To give you a rough idea how much of various cocoa products could be fatal to two common breeds look at the examples below.

The figures are approximate, based on a standard breed weight, and a standard amount of cocoa solids in the chocolate products, but even as a first approximation, make startling reading:

A Jack Russel Terrier would need to eat 55kg of White Chocolate, 227g of Milk Chocolate, 32g of Plain Dark Chocolate and only 17g of Cocoa shell mulches! A Labrador would need to eat 277kg of White Chocolate, 1.1kg of Milk Chocolate, 156g of Plain Dark Chocolate and only 83g of Cocoa shell mulches!

Fortunately we don't see too many cases of chocolate poisoning, but the problem arises since the symptoms which it produces mimic so many other things and don't occur for at least 4 – 24 hours after ingestion.

Typically, we see vomiting, including blood, excessive drinking, hyperactivity, panting, inco-ordination and a racing heart. In severe cases these signs may be accompanied by muscle rigidity, fever, seizures and heart arrhythmias, and may ultimately lead to kidney or heart failure and death.

In most cases it is best to make the dog vomit as soon as possible. Most poisons take a few hours to be fully absorbed from the stomach so inducing vomiting is useful up to 2 hours after ingestion. The best way to do this is to place a small crystal of washing soda (not washing powder, nor caustic soda) on the back of the dog's tongue and hold his mouth shut until he swallows it or starts retching. You may need to do it 2 or 3 times before anything happens. Then quickly take your dog to us!

There is no antidote for theobromine poisoning and treatment is necessary for any amount ingested. Typically, we - unless you already managed to - will induce vomiting to slow down the rate of chocolate absorption from the gut, pump out the stomach and feed activated charcoal which will absorb any theobromine left in the gut. Fitting or convulsing animals are sedated, and careful monitoring of the heart and pulse is undertaken. If necessary, certain medications can be used to regulate the heart's rhythm, but not without the risk of side-effects, so such drugs are reserved for life-threatening cases only. Your dog might have to stay on a drip for a day or two.

It is important to stress that with prompt intervention in potentially serious cases, the prognosis for a poisoned dog is usually good. Fatal cases are thankfully rare, and in general it is cocoa-bean mulch cases which cause death, rather than those caused by stolen chocolate!