

Your Dog's Sweet Tooth for Chocolate

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This article serves as emergency guidelines only. It is not a substitution for veterinary care or advice. If you need additional information, we strongly urge you to contact your veterinarian because vomiting can lead to dehydration.

You left a bowl of Hershey's chocolate kisses on your counter and you have come home to find the empty bowl on the floor and a dog who has a guilty look on his face. You look around and there is no sign of the 8 ounces of chocolate you put in that bowl and you have been gone for only 15 minutes. What should you do? What will happen if you do nothing? What exactly happens to your dog when he eats an excessive amount of chocolate? With the holidays coming up, this is a common problem we face in our veterinary practice every year.

Most of our clients are of the understanding that all they need to worry about with a "chocolate eating dog" is some diarrhea. Although most dogs will get diarrhea within about 2 -4 hours after ingestion, this isn't what the owner should be most concerned about. Chocolate contains Methylxanthine alkaloids (primary Theobromine and caffeine) and excessive intake of this ingredient can lead to vasoconstriction (narrowing of the veins and arteries), tachycardia (rapid heart rate) and central nervous stimulation. Due to the vasoconstriction in the brain, some dogs may experience seizures. Another common side effect is heart failure due to increased cardiac muscle contraction and death can occur within 12 - 36 hours after ingestion.

How much chocolate is too much? Different forms of chocolate contain varying amounts of Methylxanthine; the most toxic being cacao beans (400 -1,500 mg./ounce), followed by baker's chocolate (450 mg./ounce) as a close second and then semi-sweet chocolate (260 mg./ounce), milk chocolate (60 mg./ounce), hot chocolate (12 mg./ounce) and white chocolate (1 mg./ounce). The minimum lethal dose of caffeine and Theobromine in dogs range from 45 - 90 mg. per pound of body weight, thus 1 pound of milk chocolate or 4 ounces of baking chocolate can be lethal to a 16 lb. dog.

So, you are now staring at this sad face that is pleading for your forgiveness and you are wondering what to do next. If you know that the ingestion of this bowl of chocolate has occurred within the last hour, you will want to induce vomiting with either syrup of ipecac (\pm ml. per pound of body weight) or hydrogen peroxide (given by weight: \pm to 2 ml. per pound of body weight - remember there are 30 ml. in an ounce) using a oral dosing syringe or a turkey baster. At this point, you will need to call your veterinarian immediately. Once vomiting has been induced, your veterinarian will have you transport your dog to his/her clinic to administer activated charcoal to absorb the remaining alkaloids in the gastrointestinal tract. Hospitalization may become necessary so that I.V. fluids can be administered along with drugs to control seizures and premature ventricular contractions (heart rhythm problems). The treatment regimen can take 12 - 36 hours, depending on the response and the amount of chocolate ingested.

Dogs love chocolate and can eat a large amount of it in a short period of time. It is best to keep it out of your pet's reach, but if your dog should find his way into the candy jar you should always seek the advice of your veterinarian as the consequences may be worse than just diarrhea.