Keeping your pets safe and happy during the holidays
By Lisa Bloch

With holiday lights twinkling inside and outside homes, Christmas trees up and decorated with ornaments, and lots of activity, it's clear we're in the holiday season. While it's a festive time for most of us, the season still poses hazards and threats to our pets. Nothing can spoil good cheer like a lost pet or an emergency trip to the veterinarian, so keep these tips in mind when decorating and celebrating.

Decor and presents

While I might think the garland of pretty blue and silver felt balls stretched across my fireplace makes the perfect decoration, my cats see it as a fun new toy — one that must be investigated and, of course, pulled down as soon as possible. So, when I decorate, I try to ask myself, "Is this truly out of paw's reach?"

Not only can decorations be destroyed by our pets, but they can also be dangerous. Place candles where curious kitties and dogs can't knock them over and suffer burns. I can attest to this danger as one time my cat, Mischief, jumped on the table unexpectedly and his fluffy tail briefly caught fire as he ran by the lighted menorah. It quickly extinguished itself and he didn't sustain any burns, but we were panicked! Needless to say, this year, the menorah will be out of his reach. Also, remember that teething puppies and our bunny friends love to nibble on electrical cords and wires, so keep those hazards secured.

Ribbons and bows can look like playthings to cats but can be harmful if swallowed. They can become wrapped around a cat's intestine or cause a blockage, requiring emergency surgery. If you suspect your cat has swallowed something like that, see your veterinarian right away.

During the frenzy of present opening, it's best to confine pets. Baby gates work well by keeping smaller dogs restricted. Dog crates may be an option for larger dogs. For cats, a closed bedroom solves the problem.

Pet toxins

We all love festive holiday foods, but many can make your pets seriously ill. In dogs, onions can lead to anemia. Raisins, chocolate, and alcoholic beverages are toxic to pets. And rich, fatty foods, such as gravy, can contribute to pancreatitis, a painful condition characterized

by vomiting and lethargy that requires emergency veterinary care. Baking string, plastic wrap, and aluminum foil can cause severe digestive problems or obstruction. Finally, remember that chicken and turkey bones can become choking hazards.

For that reason, keep your pets out of the kitchen during food prep and cleanup, away from the holiday table, and out of the garbage.

Avoid stress

Remember that gatherings, loud noises, and bright lights can sometimes leave pets feeling confused and out of sorts. This stress can exacerbate pre-existing conditions, or just cause your pets to act "off." Dad dressed as Santa Claus bursting through the door carrying a big sack and loudly exclaiming, "Ho, ho, ho!" might delight the kids, but may also scare the wits out of a dog already on alert.

Lastly, we can't say this enough: Be sure your pets are microchipped and wearing collars with ID tags. Holiday excitement and open doors can be a bad mix for obvious reasons. And with the weather as cold as it is, lost pets face even more dangers.

Remember that our pets are sensitive to our moods and even small changes in the home. Be sure to give them extra love and reassurance. That's truly the best present for them.

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