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## TEN HOLIDAY TRADITIONS THAT WILL HELP KEEP YOUR PETS SAFE

### provided by Ontario SPCA

Every family has their own collection of cherished holiday traditions. When pets join the family, new traditions are created to involve our four-legged friends in our activities. Below are some traditions worth incorporating into your holidays to help keep your pets safe and healthy during the festive frenzy.

- 1. Pamper your pet's paws.** After taking your pet for a walk around the neighbourhood to enjoy the festive lights, use a damp towel to wipe your pet's paws and underside. Salt and other chemicals used to melt snow and ice on roads and sidewalks can irritate and burn your pet's sensitive paws, and can cause injury if ingested. Also, remove ice balls by placing your pet's feet in warm (not hot) water before drying them off with a towel. Consider using "booties" to protect your pet's paws.
- 2. Keep the sweets out of reach.** Holiday sweets with chocolate are not for pets - chocolate contains theobromine which can be poisonous to many animals, such as dogs, cats and ferrets, depending on the amount ingested. And, the less sweet the chocolate, the more toxic it could be. For example, unsweetened baking chocolate contains almost seven times more theobromine as milk chocolate. Vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, hyperactivity and increased thirst, urination and heart rate can be seen with the ingestion of as little as ¼ ounce of baking chocolate by a 10-pound dog.
- 3. Provide only pet-friendly platters (and drinks!).** Maintain your pet's regular diet - just one "special" meal during the holidays may give your dog or cat severe indigestion and diarrhea. This is particularly true for older animals that have more delicate digestive systems and nutritional requirements. For example, poultry bones can splinter and cause blockages, and greasy, spicy and fatty foods can cause stomach upset. Keep garbage and alcohol safely out of reach. If your pet ingests alcohol, he can become very sick and weak and may go into a coma, possibly resulting in respiratory failure.
- 4. Make pet-level areas floral-free.** Caution must be used when choosing to decorate your home with holiday florals such as mistletoe and holly berries, which can be potentially toxic to pets. Should a cat or dog eat mistletoe, they could suffer gastrointestinal upset and cardiovascular problems. Holly can cause vomiting, nausea, diarrhea and lethargy if ingested. Common holiday plants such as poinsettias are considered to be very low in toxicity, but they can still cause mild vomiting or nausea if ingested by your pet, and can irritate your pet's mouth. Lilies, appearing in many holiday floral arrangements, can cause kidney failure in cats. You may want to consider silk or plastic floral arrangements as a safe alternative.
- 5. Decorate the top two-thirds of your tree.** Christmas trees pose many dangers to pets. Christmas tree water may contain fertilizers and can cause stomach upset. Stagnant tree water may be full of bacteria, which could cause nausea, vomiting and diarrhea in your pet. If ingested, ribbons can cause intestinal obstruction, and sparkly lights can become life threatening if your pet decides to chew the cords. Consider leaving the bottom third of your tree decoration-free, or decorate it (at least the bottom third), with ornaments that are less likely to attract your pet's attention, such as dried non-toxic flowers, wood, fabric or pinecones. Secure your tree so that it can't be toppled. Supervise your pet and use barriers (e.g. baby gates) and topical pet deterrents (e.g. bitter apple spray, available from most pet stores) as necessary. If you have children's toys under your tree, be cautious with your pet playing with them as small parts can pose a serious choking hazard.
- 6. Make your pet feel like a king (or queen!).** Ensure your pet always has a warm place to sleep away from drafts and off the floor. A thick cozy dog or cat bed with a blanket or pillow is great.
- 7. Keep your pet safe inside.** With guests coming and going during the holidays take extra care that your pet does not escape outside and become lost. Cats in particular are prone to hiding and/or running away when guests, especially a large number of them, visit your home. Dogs should also be carefully supervised as they may become over-excited with all of the holiday celebrations. One solution is to place your pet in a quiet, safe and comfortable part of the house away from all of the guests, but with access to food, water, litter box, etc. Alternatively, you may wish to use a crate, baby gate or x-pen (a metal exercise pen for dogs that comes in a variety of sizes) for short periods to keep animals from getting underfoot during the festive frenzy, while allowing them to be part of the celebration.

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**8. Protect your pet from the cold.** When the temperature drops below freezing pets should not be left outside for extended periods of time. Cats, short-coated dogs and puppies are particularly vulnerable in cold temperatures. Keep cats indoors and protect your dogs from frostbite or hypothermia by taking them outside for short periods during cold weather. Consider slipping your short-coated dog or puppy into a comfortable dog sweater or coat as an extra layer of warmth. Never shave your dog down to the skin in winter, as a longer coat will provide more warmth. As well, when bathing your dog in winter months, ensure he is completely dry before taking him outside. Outdoor dogs must be provided with adequate shelter and a constant supply of fresh water. The pamphlet "Ideal Doghouse for Ontario's Outdoor Dogs" is available from the Ontario SPCA website at [www.ontariospca.ca/docs/Ideal\\_Doghouse.pdf](http://www.ontariospca.ca/docs/Ideal_Doghouse.pdf).

**9. Be wary of seasonal dangers.** Ethylene glycol - found in antifreeze and brake fluids - tastes sweet, so animals may ingest it; even a very small amount can be fatal. Emergency veterinary care is essential. Clean up any spills and dispose of the rags as a hazardous waste. Also, be alert for antifreeze spills when out on walks. Be aware of cats seeking warmth under vehicles. When the vehicle motor is started, the cat can be injured or killed by the fan belt. Make a point of knocking on the hood or sounding the horn before starting the engine. This will warn away any cats who may be hiding in your vehicle.

**10. Think carefully before giving a pet as a present.** The holiday season may not be the ideal time to bring a new animal into your home. If you have planned to add a new pet to your family during the holidays, ensure that you will be home to provide the care and attention your new family member will require as he adjusts to his new environment. Alternatively, you could adopt your pet before Christmas, but wait until after the holidays to bring him home. Honour your family's pet adoption by placing a photo of him under the tree, or a stuffed animal representative of your new pet, or pet products and accessories for when he does arrive. While planned pet adoptions as gifts are great, it is not recommended to give pets as "surprise" gifts to friends or family members.

Remember, the best holiday present for your pet is plenty of love and attention. Include your pet in your holiday activities and give him lots of pats, play time and appropriate exercise.

If you have questions related to holiday hazards, please contact your veterinarian.