

The Deadly Dog-Walking Hazards No One Expects to Find

A dog collapsed unexpectedly while on a walk with his owner, and in another incident, more than 14 dogs became sick - and one died - after consuming treats left behind on a beach. You can't be too careful with your dog's safety - be aware of these hidden hazards outdoors, and in your own home.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A dog collapsed unexpectedly while on a walk with his owner; an emergency veterinary clinic found the opioid oxycodone in his system
- In another example, at least 14 dogs became sick, and one died, after consuming tainted treats left on a beach in Rye, New Hampshire in 2018
- While it's possible for your dog to ingest a toxin while you're out and about, there's likely an even greater chance of him ingesting a medication right in your own home
- Pet Poison Helpline is also receiving increased reports of pets consuming multiple medications at once
- Keep a close eye on your environment when out for walks and keep your dog away from any debris along your path
- While at home, keep all medications out of reach of your pets — stored safely in a locked medicine cabinet

When on a walk, dogs can't resist sniffing and, in some cases, sampling objects that cross their path. In the case of drugs that may have been discarded outdoors, the consequences can be deadly. NBC News reported one case of a dog, Chase, that went for a walk in Santa Monica, California.¹

He and his owner stopped at a grassy spot along the coast, overlooking the water. Not long after, Chase collapsed. His owner rushed him to an emergency veterinary clinic, where the opioid oxycodone was found in his system. "I was in shock. I thought they called the wrong person, truthfully," Chase's owner said. The dog pulled through after prompt treatment but lost his eyesight due to the poisoning.

While it may seem like a rare occurrence, Dr. Steven Centola, a veterinarian at an emergency clinic near Los Angeles, told NBC News that it happens more often than you'd think: "We'll have a combination of opioids, or potentially cocaine, amphetamines, methamphetamines, and usually they'll test positive for multiple toxicities at once."²

Dogs Poisoned at the Beach

In another example, at least 14 dogs became sick, and one died, after walking a stretch of beach in Rye, New Hampshire in 2018. Pet owners reportedly found treat-like food items in the area, located between Wallis Road Extension and Wallis Sands State Beaches.

While initial testing done on the deceased dog and a “pill-pocket” type treat found on the beach turned up no traces of poison, continued testing revealed the presence of caffeine.³ Caffeine can quickly become toxic to dogs because they’re more sensitive to its effects than we are.

It remains unclear whether someone set out to intentionally poison dogs walking on the New Hampshire beach by leaving out caffeine-laced treats. However, as noted in the *Journal of Medical Toxicology*, “in cases of intentional poisoning, caffeine as a cause may not be readily suspected, unless awareness is increased among veterinarians and diagnostic professionals.”⁴

It's important to be aware of your surroundings when taking your dog for walks, and if symptoms of poisoning occur, to seek veterinary help immediately. Symptoms will vary depending on the substance ingested, but common signs include vomiting, wobbliness, struggling to breathe, seizures or collapse.⁵

Top 10 Human Drugs That Are Poisonous to Pets

While it’s possible for your dog to ingest a toxin while you’re out and about, there’s likely an even greater chance of him ingesting a medication right in your own home. Nearly half of calls received by the Pet Poison Helpline involve over-the-counter and prescription medications meant for humans.⁶ They’ve compiled a list of the top 10 such drugs most commonly ingested by pets.⁷

1. **Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** — NSAIDs, which include Advil, Motrin and Aleve, can make your pet sick in a dose of just one or two pills. Cats can suffer kidney and liver damage, and any pet that ingests NSAIDs can develop ulcers of the digestive tract. Symptoms of poisoning include digestive upset, vomiting, bloody stool, increased thirst, increased frequency of urination, staggering and seizures.
2. **Acetaminophen** — Acetaminophen is found in Tylenol, certain types of Excedrin and several sinus and cold preparations. Cats are at particular risk from acetaminophen, as just two extra-strength tablets can be fatal, while a regular-strength tablet may damage their red blood cells. If your dog ingests acetaminophen, permanent liver damage can result.

Symptoms of acetaminophen poisoning are lethargy, trouble breathing, dark-colored urine, diarrhea and vomiting.

3. **Antidepressants** — If your dog or cat ingests an antidepressant, symptoms can include listlessness, vomiting and in some cases, a condition known as serotonin syndrome. This condition can cause agitation, disorientation and an elevated heart rate, along with elevated blood pressure and body temperature, tremors and seizures.

Cats seem to enjoy the taste of Effexor, and just one pill can lead to poisoning, including severe neurologic and cardiac side effects. Other common brand names of antidepressants are Prozac, Cymbalta and Lexapro.

4. **ADD and ADHD drugs** — Prescription attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) drugs contain amphetamines that are very dangerous for pets. Ingesting even minimal amounts of these medications can cause life-threatening tremors, seizures, elevated body temperature and heart problems. Common brand names include Concerta, Adderall and Ritalin.
5. **Benzodiazepines and sleep aids** — Benzodiazepines and sleep aids with brand names like Xanax, Klonopin, Ambien and Lunesta are designed to reduce anxiety and help people sleep better. However, in pets, they sometimes have the opposite effect.

About half the dogs who ingest sleep aids become agitated instead of sedated. In addition, these drugs may cause severe lethargy, incoordination and a slowed breathing rate. In cats, some forms of benzodiazepines can cause liver failure.

6. **Birth control medications** — Birth control pills (e.g., estrogen, estradiol, progesterone) often come in packages that dogs find very tempting. While small amounts of these medications typically aren't problematic, large ingestions of estrogen and estradiol can cause bone marrow suppression, especially in birds. In addition, intact female pets are at an increased risk of side effects from estrogen poisoning.
7. **Ace inhibitors** — Angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors such as Zestril and Altace are commonly used to treat high blood pressure in people and, occasionally, pets. Though overdoses can cause low blood pressure, dizziness and weakness, this category of medication is typically safe. Pets ingesting small amounts of this medication can potentially be monitored at home, unless they have kidney failure or heart disease.
8. **Beta-blockers** — Even taken in very small quantities, beta-blockers used to treat high blood pressure can cause serious problems for pets. Overdoses can trigger life-threatening decreases in blood pressure and a very slow heart rate.
9. **Thyroid hormones** — Pets — especially dogs — get underactive thyroids too. However, the dose of thyroid hormone (e.g., Armour, Nature-Throid and WP Thyroid, Synthroid) needed to treat dogs is much higher than the human dose. Therefore, if dogs accidentally get into thyroid hormones at home, it rarely results in problems.

However, large acute overdoses in cats and dogs can cause muscle tremors, nervousness, panting, a rapid heart rate and aggression.

10. **Cholesterol lowering agents** — These medications, often called "statins," include Lipitor, Zocor and Crestor. While pets don't typically get high cholesterol, they may still get into the pill bottle. While most ingestions only cause mild vomiting or diarrhea, long-term exposure could cause serious side effects.

Ingestion of Multiple Medications Common

With so many medications in circulation, Pet Poison Helpline is receiving increased reports of pets consuming multiple medications at once. In 2022, they've had more than 7,600 multi-drug cases, including one case involving 30 different drugs and supplements.⁸

"Due to the vast array of human medications, most veterinarians don't have extensive knowledge regarding the toxicology of them on pets," said Dr. Renee Schmid, a senior veterinary toxicologist at Pet Poison Helpline. She continued:⁹

"It becomes even more challenging for veterinary teams when they're treating a pet who has ingested multiple medications. Not only does the veterinarian need to potentially be concerned about each specific medication, but also its potential interaction with other ingested drugs. Pet Poison Helpline veterinary toxicologists like myself face that challenge on a regular basis ..."

Prevention is the best option, so when you're on a walk with your pet, keep a close eye on your environment and keep your dog away from any debris along your path. While at home, keep all medications out of reach of your pets — stored safely in a locked medicine cabinet.

Sources and References

¹ [NBC News October 19, 2022](#)

² [WCVB February 20, 2019](#)

³ [J Med Toxicol. 2012 Dec; 8\(4\): 436-440](#)

⁴ [Pet Poison Helpline, Top 10 Human Medications Poisonous to Pets](#)

⁵ [Pet Poison Helpline, Overdose Overachievers](#)
