

Warning: This Sugar Can Poison Your Pet

Many pet owners know to keep their pets (especially dogs) away from any traces of xylitol, but they likely don't know about this sugar that's really xylitol in disguise. Know what to look for on labels of food & nonfood items to save your pet from its potential side effects liver failure and death.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

Mar 20, 2023 • 4 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Birch sugar is the same thing as xylitol, a sweetener known as a sugar alcohol that's toxic to pets
- Xylitol was originally found in birch bark; now, it's often made inexpensively using the remnants of corncobs from ethanol plants
- Xylitol may also be referred to as "birch sap" or "wood sugar"
- In dogs, consuming xylitol can lead to a sudden release of insulin, followed by a sharp drop in blood sugar (hypoglycemia), triggering vomiting, loss of consciousness and seizures
- Immediate and early treatment, which involves intravenous dextrose (sugar), is necessary if your dog has consumed a large amount of xylitol
- Xylitol, or birch sugar, may be found in chewing gum, candy, ice cream, breath mints, sugar-free desserts, medications, dietary supplements, marijuana edibles and more

If you see the ingredient "birch sugar" on a food label, keep it out of reach of your pet. While birch sugar sounds harmless — even natural — it's the same thing as xylitol, a sweetener known as a sugar alcohol that's toxic to pets.

As for why xylitol may be referred to as birch sugar, it was originally found in birch bark. Now, however, it's often made inexpensively using the remnants of corncobs from ethanol plants.¹

Ingesting xylitol is especially dangerous to dogs, but cats and ferrets are also at risk. Because it has a sweet flavor, and dogs have plenty of sweet receptors in their tastebuds, your canine buddy is also more likely to eat as much as they can. Cats, for comparison, can't taste sweet flavors as well as dogs, so they may be less interested in gobbling up a xylitol-sweetened food.

Watch Out for Birch Sugar in Foods

To confirm, "birch sugar" is the same thing as xylitol. This sugar-free sweetener may also be referred to as "birch sap" or "wood sugar." None of these should be fed to your pets.

Calls regarding xylitol poisoning in pets increased 108% from 2015 to 2020, according to the Pet Poison Helpline (PPH), which noted that such poisonings jumped 47.2% from 2018 to 2019 alone. In 2020, xylitol became the second most common poison for pets, behind only chocolate.²

"Many people are cutting back on sugar, which has led to an enormous increase in the number of products that contain xylitol, a lower-calorie sugar substitute with a low glycemic index that is found naturally in berries, plums, corn, oats, mushrooms, lettuce, trees and some other fruits," PPH noted. "Now it is being used to sweeten everything from chocolate and other candy, to peanut butter and toothpaste."³

Xylitol is found in many products that you might not suspect, so it's important to scour labels carefully for it and birch sugar. Examples of foods that commonly contain xylitol or birch sugar include:⁴

- Chewing gum
- Candy
- Ice cream
- Dietary supplements, including chewy or gummy vitamins
- Liquid compounded medications, including gabapentin
- Mouthwash
- Sugar-free desserts
- Breath mints
- Peanut butter

Any food that's sugar-free or "diet" could potentially contain xylitol, but it's also found in some surprising places. Marijuana THC-infused edibles are one source to be aware of, as they often contain xylitol and are becoming more popular with the legalization of marijuana.⁵ Other nonfood items that may contain xylitol include:⁶

- Toothpaste and dental floss
- Nasal sprays
- Skin care products

Why Is Xylitol (Birch Sugar) Dangerous for Pets?

Consuming xylitol can lead to a sudden release of insulin, followed by a sharp drop in blood sugar (hypoglycemia), triggering vomiting, loss of consciousness and seizures. Larger doses can also cause liver failure and death, which may begin hours or days after ingestion.^{7,8}

If your dog consumes a product that contains xylitol, get to an emergency veterinary clinic right away. Treatment involves intravenous dextrose (sugar), which may be needed for 24 hours or more.⁹ If ingestion is caught early and treatment begins right away, most dogs can be decontaminated and have a full recovery.¹⁰

PPH has an extensive catalogue of how much xylitol is found in different products, so it's a good resource if your dog ingests something suspect. The dose matters with this compound, with larger amounts being much more dangerous. Foods that contain xylitol as the primary sweetener, meaning they have high amounts and must be kept away from

pets, include:¹¹

- Clemmy's Rich and Creamy ice cream products
- Dr. John's products (hard and soft candies, chocolates, drink mixes, etc.)
- Jell-O sugar-free pudding snacks
- Nature's Hollow jams, syrup, ketchup, honey, etc.
- SparX Candy
- Zipfizz energy drink-mix powders

The Xylitol Paradox — It Has Some Beneficial Properties

Considering the health risks of large amounts, you might be surprised to learn that some pet dental products contain xylitol in small quantities. This is because xylitol has known plaque-reducing effects in humans. However, it's thought that dogs have much more complete and rapid absorption of xylitol compared to humans, which is why it's toxic for them but not for us, at least in larger doses.¹²

A pilot study on the effectiveness of xylitol to reduce plaque in dogs when added to drinking water even had favorable results.¹³ A low-dose xylitol drinking water additive led to a 5.1% decrease in mean tooth plaque score and a 14.9% decrease in mean calculus score after 90 days. But there's a big caveat in that no one knows whether it's safe for dogs to consume xylitol long-term, even at low doses. According to the researchers:¹⁴

"If adequate instructions are given and client compliance is good, the product used in this clinical trial poses minimal acute health risk to patients. Despite this, there are no studies reporting the health risks of chronic, low dose administration of xylitol in dogs."

Because there are other ways to keep your dog's teeth clean — like regular brushing — I don't recommend taking any chances with xylitol and your dog. To protect your pet, keep any and all products that contain it — and birch sugar or birch sap — safely out of your pet's reach.

Sources and References

^{1, 6, 8, 9} [ASPCA May 23, 2019](#)

^{2, 3, 5, 7} [Pet Poison Helpline, Xylitol Pet Poisoning Cases More Than Doubled Over Five Years](#)

⁴ [Colorado State University October 8, 2021](#)

^{10, 11} [Pet Poison Helpline, There's Xylitol in That Too?](#)

^{12, 13, 14} [Can Vet J. 2020 Jan; 61\(1\): 63–68](#)
