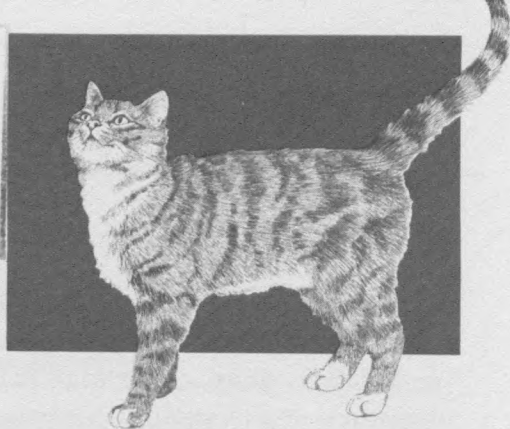
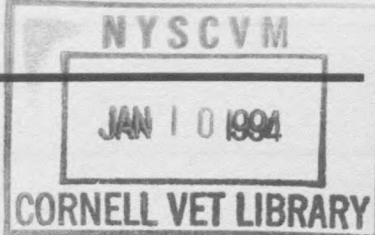


# Perspectives On Cats

A Newsletter for Cat Fanciers  
From The Cornell Feline Health Center

Winter 1993

## NEWSLETTER



## 'Tis the Season to be Cautious

The holidays provide additional health hazards for pets, especially from unintentional poisonings. However, you can make your home safer for your cat by taking the proper precautions or changing how you decorate.

### Plants

Holiday plants are popular gifts during the holiday season. Unfortunately, many of the plants are potentially poisonous to cats. Reactions can range from mild to severe (life threatening). Table 1 provides information on the poison potential of common holiday plants. If there is any sign that a cat has eaten any of these plants, call your veterinarian immediately for possible treatment.

Applying hot pepper sauce to the leaves and stems will deter most cats from nibbling on plants. Another alternative is to locate plants out of the cat's reach or territory.

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### Holiday Greens

This includes all members of the balsam, juniper (Juniperus), cedar (Cedrus), pine (Pinus), and fir (Abies) trees. Although the poisoning potential is very low, the volatile oils in the saps can cause skin irritation (contact dermatitis), eye inflammation (conjunctivitis), or gastric irritation. For contact dermatitis, thoroughly bathing the cat will usually provide relief. Conjunctivitis and gastric irritation can be relieved by medications provided by your veterinarian.

### Decorations & Wrappings

Many common decorations such as candles, ornaments, icicles and Styrofoam are considered non-toxic but may cause problems by irritating or obstructing the digestive or respiratory tracts. Angel hair has low toxicity but may cause irritation of eyes, skin, and the digestive tract. Your veterinarian can provide medications to soothe these irritations.

Tinsel, ribbon and wrapping paper ingested by an animal could also cause obstruction to the digestive tract.

### Bubbling Lights

These lights contain a chemical (chlorinated hydrocarbon methylene chloride) in unspecified concentrations. This compound is considered mildly toxic. Exposure results by eating or breathing the chemical. Clinical signs include depression or convulsions. Large amounts can cause liver and kidney damage. Prolonged breathing of the chemical

may result in carbon monoxide poisoning and cause the lungs to fill with fluid (pulmonary edema). Treatment by your veterinarian may include orally administering activated charcoal and a saline cathartic followed by symptomatic care focusing on central nervous system signs. Liver function may also be monitored depending on the cat's exposure to the chemical.

### **Tree Preservatives**

Cats may be attracted to drinking the treated water because tree preservatives primarily contain glucose. The glucose is not the problem, unless the cat is a diabetic. It is the addition of small amounts of fertilizer and iron salts in many of the tree preservatives that are most toxic. Ingesting large amounts of glucose and fertilizers may cause irritation to the digestive system, resulting in vomiting.

You can prevent your cat from drinking the tainted water by covering the stand with a tree skirt or a converted plastic gallon container. To convert a plastic container, first cut it in half, and discard the top half. Cut a large hole in the center of the bottom half for the tree trunk to fit through. From the center hole cut a slit to the outside edge of the container to provide easy access for watering the tree.

### **Fireplace Colors**

The colors are created from salts of various metals such as copper, barium, lead, arsenic, selenium, antimony, thallium and others. They are considered moderately toxic. Exposed pets may have convulsions and vomiting that will require treatments administered by your veterinarian. Treatments will be directed toward the specific metal(s) ingested.

### **Sprays and Snow Flock**

These are relatively inert chemicals with low toxicity. Ingredients include a combination of various halogenated hydrocarbons, methylene chloride, sodium methacrylate, stearic and vinyl acetate resin. Signs of contact include mild eye irritation, vomiting and central nervous system depression. If inhaled,

pulmonary irritation and aspiration pneumonia may also occur. Treatments will depend on the body systems affected.

### **Chocolate**

If your cat has a sweet tooth, be aware that chocolate can be very toxic to cats, particularly unsweetened chocolate. The chemical substances that cause toxic reactions include caffeine, theobromine and theophylline. Signs of poisoning initially include vomiting, which may be followed by diarrhea, increased urination, restlessness, weakness, seizures and coma. Death results from cardiac arrhythmia or respiratory failure. Treatment may include evacuating the stomach, repeated treatments of activated charcoal every three hours, and the use of drugs to control seizures and heart arrhythmias.

### **Toys**

Most toys are non-toxic if ingested. However, toys may cause impactions in the digestive tract which may require surgical removal of the object. For

## *Perspectives* *On Cats*

*A Newsletter for Cat Fanciers  
From The Cornell Feline Health Center*

The ultimate purpose of the Cornell Feline Health Center is to improve the health of cats everywhere, by developing methods to prevent or cure feline diseases, and by providing continuing education to veterinarians and cat owners. All contributions are tax-deductible.

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Table 1

Plant	Toxin	Toxic Reaction
Amaryllis	The bulb contains an alkaloid substance that is a gastric irritant.	Nausea and vomiting
Christmas Mistletoe	Sympathetic amines that stimulate smooth muscle contractions.	Nausea and vomiting; also can increase blood pressure, pulse and respiration rates.
English Holly	Compounds that irritate the digestive tract.	Nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhea immediately occur after eating the plant.
Jerusalem Cherry	Solanine glycosides	Vomiting, abdominal pain, bloody diarrhea and a dry mouth are noticeable 18 to 24 hours after the plant is eaten. May also cause cardiac arrest.
Poinsettia	Diterpene esters and other irritating compounds	Skin or mouth irritation, vomiting.

information concerning ingredients in toys contact the Consumer Product Safety Commission at (800) 638-2772.

### A Final Word

Knowing the poisoning potential of holiday decorations is the first step in preventing accidental poisonings. The next step is to take the necessary precautions to reduce the risk. ■

### References

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*Adapted from an article written by Dr. Danielle Stanek and Dr. Larry Thompson of the College of Veterinary Medicine at Cornell University. The article was published in the November 1992 issue of "Veterinary Update," a newsletter published by the Diagnostic Laboratory.*

### Cornell Summer Session Offering Weekend Seminars in 1994

The Cornell University Feline Study Program is offering two weekend seminars—*Solving Feline Behavior Problems*, May 7-8, 1994, and a *Comprehensive Seminar for Cat Breeders*, June 25-26, 1994. The courses are designed for cat breeders, veterinary practice staff members, and other people with a serious interest in cats. The charge for each course is \$285 and includes tuition; course materials; a formal Cornell University certificate of completion; and most meals. For further information, please contact the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions, Box 218, B20 Day Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853-2801; telephone (607) 255-7259; fax (607) 255-8942. ■

**Important Notice:**  
Our offices will be closed for the holidays from December 24 through January 2.



*Q. I am a cat owner and one of my cats has an unusual problem—she licks all the hair off her abdomen and front legs. Do you know why she does this? Can anything be done to stop her from doing this?—B. J., Oregon*

A. Symmetrical alopecia, or symmetrical hair loss, is a fairly common problem and has many potential causes. If the areas of baldness are created by the cat's pulling or chewing of the hair, the most frequent cause is any one of several types of itchy skin disease. Your veterinarian will want to explore a number of possibilities including both internal and external parasites, inhalant allergies, food allergies, and fungal infections. Diagnostic tests such as skin scrapings and fecal examinations for parasites, cultures for ringworm fungus, and special diets used to diagnose food allergy may be recommended by your veterinarian. If inhalant allergy is suspected, intradermal skin tests are necessary to reach a positive diagnosis and are oftentimes performed by a veterinary dermatologist. If these disorders are ruled out, then the cause of hair-pulling could be behavioral (psychogenic alopecia). However, this problem rarely occurs in cats.

Treatment depends on the results of the diagnostic tests. Parasites and ringworm are treated with appropriate medications. Food allergies are managed by feeding a diet that is hypoallergenic for that particular cat. Inhalant allergies are treated with specific allergy injections and/or a combination of various anti-itching drugs. The rare cat with psychogenic alopecia often responds to avoidance of stressful situations and the judicious administration of anti-anxiety medications.

*Q. I am in a dilemma regarding feline leukemia virus (FeLV). Even though my cats are all inoculated against FeLV, some veterinarians feel that my cats are still at risk to the virus. Others feel that they are completely protected against it. Why is there such a discrepancy as to the vaccine's effectiveness? I would also like to know why the vaccines aren't further advanced than what they were in the early 1980s. Also, what is the most accurate test for FeLV?—J. G., Pennsylvania*

A. Although very useful, none of the vaccines currently available for protection against feline leukemia virus (FeLV) infection are 100% protective. Even though there has been advancement in vaccine technology since the 1980s (the first FeLV vaccine became available in 1985), it has been impossible to formulate one that provides complete protection in a vaccinated cat. For a FeLV vaccine to become licensed by the United States Department of Agriculture, it must provide protection against permanent infection in at least 75% of vaccinated cats. There are, however, no standardized tests available that prove that one vaccine is clearly superior to others. Most veterinarians feel that it is wise to vaccinate all cats that might be exposed to the virus even though not all will be protected.

Blood tests for FeLV infection are either the immunofluorescent antibody (IFA) test or the enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) test. The ELISA tests are used the most in veterinary offices. Different brands of the ELISA tests are relatively equivalent in their ability to detect infected or non-infected cats. False-positive ELISA results can occasionally occur, but false negatives are uncommon. ELISA tests will detect infection at an

*(continued on page 8)*



## *Honor Roll*

The Feline Health Center gratefully acknowledges the following people, foundations and cat clubs who have contributed \$100 or more to support the center's work. Funds are applied to our feline disease studies and special programs such as the diagnostic and consultant service. Your support directly helps us develop effective vaccines, better diagnostic tests and more efficacious treatments for cat diseases. Thank you for your active support. (An envelope has been provided in this issue if you would like to make a year-end gift to the center.)

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## Purr-fect Gifts

**Tee-shirts (\$14)**—Shirts are a 50/50 blend of polyester and cotton with an attractive design of a cat and kitten with the Center's logo. Colors: pink, light blue, light green, grey, and white. Adult sizes: small, medium, large, X-large and XX-large.

**The Cornell Book of Cats (\$30)**—This comprehensive reference on cat health care is a must for every cat owner's library.

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**Honor Certificates (\$25)**—If you're looking for a special way to say "thank you" to your veterinarian, consider a special personalized 8x10 parchment certificate. Your veterinarian will also receive a personalized letter with the certificate.

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## Mail Bag

(continued from page 4)

earlier stage than the IFA tests, but a few cats that test ELISA-positive will ultimately clear themselves of the infection. On the other hand, cats testing positive on the IFA test will usually remain infected for life.

*Q. I use clumping litter. But I heard that a man lost a whole litter of kittens when their wet noses created clumping in their nostrils and they suffocated. There has been no trouble with my cat, but I still wonder and worry. Have you heard of any stories such as this? Is this a reasonable fear?—M. A., Massachusetts*

A. I very rarely hear of this problem, so I suspect this type of situation occurs very infrequently, if at all. Two thoughts come to mind. First, because kittens are able to breath through their mouths, they should still be able to breath even if litter did obstruct their nostrils. Second, unless the kittens already had a nasal discharge, perhaps from an upper respiratory tract infection, then it is hard to imagine that much litter would stick in the first place. A post-mortem

examination might have revealed another cause of death unrelated to litter on the nostrils. Overall, I think that clumping-type litters offer many advantages. However, you must decide if you feel that the benefits outweigh the possible risks. ■

**If you have a question you would like answered in this column, please send it to: Mail Bag, Cornell Feline Health Center, 618 VRT, Ithaca, NY 14853. Your question(s) will be answered in the next issue of *Perspectives on Cats*.**



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