

Poisoning in Cats – Common Causes, Symptoms & Treatment

 www.cat-world.com.au/poisoning-in-cats.html

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Poisoning at a glance:

- Poisoning is a life-threatening emergency which requires immediate veterinary care.
- Common poisons include human medications, insecticides, household cleaners, plants and rodenticides.
- Symptoms can vary but may include vomiting, diarrhea, drooling, confusion, lethargy, unsteady gait.
- Treatment depends on the type of poisoning but may include gastric decontamination (induce vomiting/pump the stomach), activated charcoal to prevent further absorption, toxin-specific antidotes, fluid therapy and supportive care. The earlier your cat receives treatment, the better the outcome.

Despite cats having a reputation for being somewhat picky, sadly this is not always the case and every year many cats succumb to poisoning. Almost all poisonings are life-threatening and require immediate veterinary attention if your cat is to stand any chance. Poisoning can be accidental, such as a cat eating something he shouldn't, or having something spilled onto his coat, or deliberate (feeding the cat baited food etc). Poisons can affect many body systems including:

- Cardiotoxin – Toxins which affect the heart
- Neurotoxin – Toxins which affect the nervous system
- Dermatotoxin – Toxins which affect the skin
- Enterotoxin – Toxins which affect the intestines
- Hemotoxin – Toxins which affect the blood
- Hepatotoxin – Toxins which affect the liver
- Nephrotoxin – Toxins which affect the kidneys
- Ototoxin – Toxins which affect the ear and vestibular system
- Genitotoxin – Toxins which affect the reproductive and urinary system
- Immunotoxin – Toxins which affect the immune system

Ten most common cat poisons:

Below is a list of the ten most common poisons ingested according to the [Pet Poisons Hotline](#).

1. Topical insecticides, especially dog flea products
2. Household cleaners
3. Antidepressants
4. Lillies
5. Insoluble oxalate plants (Dieffenbachia, Philodendron)
6. Cold and flu medication
7. Tylenol (paracetamol)
8. Glow sticks
9. ADHD medications/amphetamines
10. Rat poison

The most commonly searched articles on Cat-World are:

1. Chocolate (theobromine)
2. Aspirin
3. Lillies
4. Tylenol (paracetamol)
5. Pyrethrin
6. Antifreeze (ethylene glycol)
7. Snail bait
8. Ibuprofen (Advil/Nurofen)
9. Rat poison
10. Lead

Note: Cat-World hasn't covered all possible poisons listed by the Pet Poison Hotline, which obviously affects results.

How do cats become poisoned?

The most common route is ingestion of a toxic substance orally, other routes of toxicity may include via direct contact with the skin, injection and inhaled.

Medication:

It is very common for cats to be poisoned by a well-meaning owner who administers a [medication which is toxic to the cat](#), accidental overdose of a medication prescribed to your cat is also a possibility.

Food:

There are a number of [human foods which are toxic to cats](#). It is common to believe that cats won't consume foods which are harmful to them but this is not always the case. Avoid giving your cat human foods, and don't leave food lying around where your cat can get into it. Cats aren't little people and they metabolise a number of foods differently to us.

Inappropriately prepared home diets can also be a problem as they may contain high levels of **vitamin D** or **vitamin A** which are both toxic in high doses. Organ meats, in particular, should be limited (but not completely withheld) due to the potential for toxicity. Vitamin toxicity can also occur in cats who have been given vitamin supplements or cod liver oil. Food poisoning is another common cause of poisoning in cats.

Eating garbage or feeding food which is out of date, improperly stored or improperly handled. While most cases

aren't life-threatening in healthy adult cats, kittens, senior cats and cats who are immunocompromised are at greater risk. There is a move towards a more natural diet for cats, which is great, but pet owners must take care. I always recommend human grade meat as well as strict hygiene with food preparation and storage.

Secondary poisoning:

This occurs when your cat eats an animal who has ingested poison. The most common being bated rats or mice. Wild caught meat such as rabbit and kangaroo many contain lead fragments which are toxic to cats.

Inhaled:

Dusts (such as lead), chemicals, fumes, smoke, insecticides, gases can all be inhaled causing a variety of toxic and respiratory symptoms.

Poisons which contaminate the coat

These are absorbed directly through the skin or ingested when the cat licks itself, some examples include paint, chemicals, antifreeze and recently there has been a sharp increase in poisoning from pain relief creams.

Deliberate poisoning:

It is not uncommon for cats to be deliberately poisoned by disgruntled neighbours. This type of poisoning may be acute or chronic (over a prolonged period of time such as vitamin toxicity).

Types of poisoning:

You may notice from the list below some poisons listed under different categories, that is because some can cause poisoning in more than one way.

Ingested

- [Snail bait](#)
- Plants ([lily](#) is a notoriously dangerous plant to cats and even the smallest amount can be fatal)
- [Antifreeze](#)
- Certain foods, especially [human foods](#) can cause toxicity in cats. Common foods include onion, macadamia nuts, garlic, tomato, and [chocolate](#).
- Medications such as [aspirin](#), [paracetamol](#), [ibuprofen](#). Only ever give your cat medication your veterinarian has prescribed and never give medications to other animals or humans.
- Flea collars
- Metals such as zinc from coins or [lead](#)

Skin

- Household cleaners including bleach, disinfectants (particularly those containing phenol, which turns white in water), laundry detergent
- Antifreeze
- Insecticides (to kill ants, wasps etc) or dog flea products which are highly toxic to cats
- Flea collars

Inhaled

- Carbon monoxide
- [Insecticides](#)
- Cyanide
- [Lead](#)

Injected

- [Snake bite](#) (or insect, spider etc)
- Medications or drugs

Symptoms:

Symptoms may vary somewhat depending on the poison ingested, symptoms can be varied and affect many body systems including gastrointestinal upset, breathing, urination and the central nervous system.

Gastrointestinal and urinary

- Loss of appetite
- [Abdominal pain](#)
- [Vomiting](#), possibly with blood
- [Diarrhea](#), possibly with blood
- Blood in cat stool
- Blood in the urine
- Dark coloured urine
- Increased or decreased urination
- Inability to urinate at all (this can occur in cats whose kidneys have been damaged due to antifreeze poisoning)

Note: Blood in vomit, feces or urine may indicate your cat has developed a blood clotting disorder for example with rodenticide.

Central nervous system

- Muscle twitching or tremors
- Change in behaviour, anxiety, confusion, excitability etc
- Loss of coordination
- [Increased salivation](#)
- Incoordination
- [Seizures](#)
- Loss of consciousness

Breathing and respiration

- Increased heart and respiratory rate (cardiac/respiratory hyperactivity may occur if your cat has ingested

a stimulant such as theobromine or caffeine)

- Respiratory distress (difficulty breathing, rapid breathing, shallow breathing)
- Change in gum colour due to cyanosis
- Coughing
- Loss of consciousness
- Extended head and neck with elbows pointed outwards

Other

- Unusual body or breath odours
- [Increased salivation](#)
- [Fever](#)
- Jaundice (yellow mucus membranes) which may be due to liver damage or destruction of the red blood cells ([hemolytic anemia](#))
- Irregular heartbeat

SLUDGE

For cats who have ingested organophosphates or carbamates, which are insecticides, there is an acronym to describe symptoms:

- **S**alivation
- **L**acrimation (tearing of the eyes)
- **U**rination
- **D**iarrhea
- **G**astrointestinal distress
- **E**mesis (vomiting)

Any kind of poisoning should be seen by a veterinarian. In the meantime, remove your cat from the source of poisoning. Call your vet to let them know you are coming in and what poison your cat has ingested. He may give you some instructions over the phone.

- If he has a collar on, remove it.
- Any contamination of the coat should also be removed with a cloth. Do not use soap and/or water until you have spoken to your veterinarian.
- Do not induce vomiting unless instructed to do so by your veterinarian.

Diagnosis:

If you suspect your cat has been poisoned, seek veterinary attention immediately. Where possible, bring along a sample of the plant or poison (including the packaging) as well as samples of vomit, feces and urine if you are able to. Call ahead and let your veterinarian know your cat has ingested poison. Do not induce vomiting unless your veterinarian tells you to do so.

The use of hydrogen peroxide is not recommended as it can result in [necroulcerative gastritis](#) in cats as well as damage the esophagus in the event that your cat has ingested a corrosive substance.

A thorough medical history will be required including possible exposure to toxins, any medication your cat is

currently on, or has been given. Questions may include:

- Does the cat have access to outdoors?
- What cleaning products do you use in the home?
- If the toxin is known, he will need to know when the cat was exposed to it, and how much?

Your veterinarian will perform a complete physical examination including evaluating the size and shape of the internal organs and checking the respiratory, neurologic, cardiovascular and urinary systems. Tests may vary depending on the suspected poison but may include:

- Complete blood count, urinalysis, and biochemical profile to evaluate organ function and look for abnormalities in normal values.
- Imaging such as ultrasound or x-ray may be required to look for foreign objects which may have been consumed.
- Blood clotting profiles.
- Arterial blood gas.
- Snake venom test kit if your cat has been bitten by a snake can help your veterinarian identify the type of snake.

Treatment:

Treatment will depend on the cause of poisoning, the earlier your cat is seen, the greater his chances of survival. If necessary, your cat will need to be stabilised before your veterinarian begins **gastric decontamination**- removing unabsorbed poisons and/or preventing further absorption from the cat where possible.

Emergency treatment:

- **Induce vomiting** to prevent further absorption of the poison if the cat was exposed within the past two hours. This treatment is contraindicated if the cat has ingested a caustic substance, is too sedate or if the cat is predisposed to aspiration pneumonia.
- **Gastric lavage** if inducing vomiting is not possible, your vet may choose to pump the stomach instead. Your cat will be put under anesthesia and a tube inserted into the esophagus and down to the stomach. Fluid is pumped down the tube and into the stomach, which is then removed by gravity.
- **Bathing the cat** with warm water and liquid soap to remove dermal contamination.
- **Surgery or endoscopy** may be necessary in cats who have ingested caustic substances or solid products such as metals which can not be removed via gastric lavage or vomiting.
- **Activated charcoal** will be given after gastric decontamination to absorb the remaining poison. Contraindications include cats who are having seizures or cats who are too sedate, to avoid aspiration.

Contraindications may include if the cat is unconscious or if the poison is corrosive.

Supportive care:

- If your cat is having seizures, he may be given anti-seizure medication to bring them under control.
- If muscle tremors are occurring, muscle relaxants such as diazepam may be administered.
- Fluid therapy to control acidosis (high levels of acid in the blood), correct dehydration and helps to flush out any remaining toxins from the body.
- Blood transfusion may be necessary for cats who have become anemic.
- Oxygen therapy in cats who are having difficulty breathing.

Toxin specific or antidotes:

- **Antifreeze/ethylene glycol:** Administration of ethanol as soon as possible in the event of antifreeze poisoning.
- **Zinc:** Chelation therapy for cats who have lead or zinc poisoning. This medication combined to lead in the blood and is excreted out of the body via the urine.
- **Rodenticide:** Vitamin K will be administered to cats who have ingested rat poison. Rodenticide works by blocking the synthesis of vitamin K which is needed by the body to make certain clotting factors.
- **Snail bait/insecticides:** Atropine may be administered to cats who have ingested snail bait or organophosphates. This drug counteracts the effect of the toxin on your cat's nervous system.
- **Snake or tick:** Antivenom will be given to cats who have been bitten or stung by a venomous insect or animal (snake, tick). This life-saving product is obtained from the serum (the straw like portion of blood) of animals (commonly horses or sheep) who have been exposed to small doses of venom and have produced antibodies against the venom.
- **Acetaminophen:** Vitamin C and/or N-acetylcysteine (NAC) may be given to cats who have ingested paracetamol (acetaminophen) which can assist with the detoxification and elimination of the toxin.
- **Ibuprofen:** Medications to protect the lining of the stomach such as ranitidine, cimetidine or famotidine for cats who have ingested ibuprofen.

Prevention:

- Keep all chemicals out of the way of your cat.
- Don't feed your cat human foods.
- If you have houseplants, make sure they are not toxic to your cat.
- Don't give your medications to pets unless instructed to do so by a veterinarian and always administer as prescribed. One person should be in charge of giving your cat medication to avoid a potential double-up of dosage.
- Make sure you notify any pest control people that you have pets when the house is sprayed. They will be able to offer pet-friendly alternatives.
- Do not let your cat roam or hunt.
- Be careful when renovating old houses, lead toxicity can occur when sanding back walls with old paint containing lead.
- If your cat is on medications, one member of the household should be designated to administer them to avoid your cat being given medications by more than one person.
- Keep all medications out of reach of cats and never store human and pet medication together.
- Store human medications separately to pet medications.
- Be careful with household cleaners and where possible, try to use *cat-friendly* products such as white vinegar.
- Clean up any chemical spills immediately.