Pets are often given as holiday gifts by well meaning family and friends. The holiday season is often stressful for people and pets alike. Because of the time demands of a new pet, especially a kitten or puppy, this type of gift will only escalate the stress of the season.

If you want to give a family member a pet, it's best to wrap up a book about the pet of choice and present that rather than the actual pet. Select the pet together later, when the family has more time to commit to the love and care of a new pet. Be sure that the recipient has specified the type of pet he/she desires and is prepared to accept the responsibility of caring for that pet.

What about buying presents for pets already in the family?

When choosing a toy as a present for your pet, think safety first. Select a toy that your pet can't chew up or swallow. Make sure the toy is non-toxic and doesn't have any small parts.

Chew toys are good choices because they help prevent periodontal disease in pets. Toys that encourage exercise and owner-pet interaction, like balls, are excellent choices. Once you give your pet a toy, be sure to play with them. The personal attention you give your pets during play time is extremely important for both you and your pet.

What are some other holiday tips for pets?

Holiday lights, ornaments, tinsel, ornament hooks and other beautiful items are very attractive to pets. If a pet chews and/or swallows any of these items, it may damage its mouth and obstruct or perforate the esophagus, stomach, or intestine.

Lighted candles are very popular during the holidays. If left unattended, a curious pet can burn itself or start a fire. Fireplaces are also hazards for pets. When you start a fire in the fireplace or light a candle, be sure an adult is supervising the beautiful flames.

Electrical items like tree lights, extension cords, and electric toys pose the threat of an electric shock if chewed on by pets.

Keep tree ornaments high on the tree. Use ribbons to tie ornaments on the tree versus metal hooks. Cloth tree skirts can be used around the tree. Remember to supervise children and pets around the tree or any lighted, potentially dangerous decorations or toys.

Plants used to decorate the home during the holidays may be toxic. Some of the more common toxic varieties are mistletoe (including the berries) and holly. If you bring these plants into your home, keep them out of the reach of your pets.

Foods like turkey, chocolate and alcohol are potentially hazardous for pets. If you share the turkey, chicken or ham with your pet, be sure not to serve old meat and/or poultry bones. And be sure trash is secure because even though you may not “give” turkey and other bones to your dogs, dogs are notorious for serving themselves when the opportunity presents itself.

Spoiled meat can harbor preformed toxins of bacteria like Staph and Clostridia that may result in vomiting, depression, and bloody diarrhea if eaten. If a botulism toxin is consumed, muscle paralysis, coma and respiratory failure may result.

Turkey carcasses are often shared with pets. Cooked poultry bones easily splinter when chewed and can lacerate or perforate the pet’s mouth, esophagus and/or intestine.

Chocolate is a food item frequently enjoyed during the holiday season. A pet can easily consume enough chocolate to result in illness.

Often served during the holidays, alcohol is a central nervous system depressant in pets. A 30 pound dog may be drunk after just two tablespoons of whiskey. While under the influence of alcohol, otherwise docile pets may inflict serious bites and scratches to you or others in your home.

The holiday season can be a happy time for the family and pets. Be sure to take proper safety precautions. This column will resume Feb. 6, 2011.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Veterinary Hospital. The large volume of questions does not allow us to directly respond to specific email questions so please watch for your answer in the column. Email your questions for the column to dvmoncall@postoffice.cvhs.okstate.edu and watch for your answer.

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