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Essential Oil and Liquid Potpourri Toxicity in Dogs and Cats

Essential oils are the concentrated liquids (volatile organic compounds) of plants. Essential oils have become popular for their use in aromatherapy and alternative medicine; they are also used in cleaning products, food and drink flavorings, herbal remedies, perfumes, personal care products, and liquid potpourris. Liquid potpourris are often used as home air fresheners and fragrances.

Many liquid potpourri products and essential oils, including oil of cinnamon, citrus, pennyroyal, peppermint, pine, sweet birch, tea tree (melaleuca), wintergreen, and ylang ylang, are poisonous to pets. Both ingestion and skin exposure can be toxic.

How hazardous are essential oils and liquid potpourri to dogs and cats?

Essential oils and liquid potpourris contain chemicals that are rapidly absorbed orally or through the skin. Many of these chemicals are metabolized through the liver. In addition, cats lack some of the enzymes necessary to effectively metabolize these chemicals. Therefore, cats, neonates, and animals with liver disease are more sensitive to their effects. Liquid potpourri and some essential oils can also irritate or burn the skin and mouth.

Only a couple of licks or a small amount on the skin could be harmful to a dog or cat.



Photo courtesy of Pet Poison Helpline

Only a couple of licks or a small amount on the skin could be harmful to a dog or cat, depending on the ingredients in a specific product and how the pet is exposed. Cats can be exposed by tasting liquid potpourri as it simmers or by coming in contact with liquid from leaking or overturned containers. Cats in particular are prolific self-groomers, so if these products get on their skin, they will often ingest them.

What are the signs of essential oil or liquid potpourri poisoning?

Symptoms may include:

- Fragrance or scent on hair coat, skin, or breath or in vomit
- Changes in breathing
- Difficulty walking or uncoordinated gait
- Drooling
- Lethargy or weakness
- Muscle tremors
- Pawing at the mouth or face

- Redness or burns on the lips, gums, tongue, or skin
- Vomiting

What should I do if I suspect that my dog or cat has been exposed to essential oils or liquid potpourri?

Rapid diagnosis and treatment are imperative. If you believe that your pet has ingested or come in contact with essential oils or liquid potpourri, call your veterinarian or National Animal Poison Control Center* (888) 426-4435 immediately. The sooner you seek treatment, the better the prognosis and outcome for your pet.

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In addition:

- Do not induce vomiting or give activated charcoal to your dog or cat, unless your veterinarian specifically directs you to do so.
- Put the product packaging in a sealed plastic bag, and take it with you to the veterinary clinic.
- If any product is on the skin or fur, quickly wash it off using a mild hand dishwashing detergent.

How are essential oil or liquid potpourri poisonings treated, and what is the prognosis?

Fast and aggressive treatment by your veterinarian is essential to reverse any toxic effects and prevent any severe problems from developing. If clinical signs have developed, treatment will be based on those symptoms.

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Your veterinarian will perform blood work to determine if the liver and kidneys have been affected. Intravenous (IV) fluids may be used for hydration, and sometimes a soft diet or feeding tube may be necessary. Other treatments may include anti-vomiting medication, medications to protect the stomach, pain medication, antibiotics, and medication to protect the liver.

Some types of oils are more toxic than others, so recovery may depend on the specific oils ingested. There is no antidote for this toxicity; however, with early intervention and supportive treatment, most pets can survive this type of poisoning.

How can I prevent my pet from being exposed to essential oils and liquid potpourri?

Keep essential oils and liquid potpourri products out of reach of pets at all times. Curious animals may want to investigate the sweet-smelling liquids, so never leave opened essential oils or simmering potpourri unattended. In addition, consult a veterinarian before using any essential oils or other herbal products on your pet. Never apply a concentrated essential oil on your pet!

*National Animal Poison Control Center is an animal poison control service available 24 hours, 7 days a week for pet owners and veterinary professionals who require assistance treating a potentially poisoned pet..

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Dr. Charlotte Flint, DVM

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