

Plant poisonings in dogs and cats

Plant poisonings in dogs and cats are far less common than in herbivorous livestock in South Africa. There have been a few cases documented in South Africa where common ornamental or house plants have caused poisonings. Dogs and cats are generally not plant eaters, but they may chew on plants for various reasons. Many of these poisonings are not fatal and only cause mild symptoms, however some, if left untreated can be fatal. We will look at some of the common garden and house plants that could potentially cause disease in dogs and cats.

The easiest way to classify these plants is to divide them into categories according to which system in the body is affected.

Plants causing nervous system signs include the Syringa tree, yesterday-today-and tomorrow and the moonflower. The plants can cause a variety of symptoms from ataxia to paralysis, drowsiness and seizures, even gastro-intestinal upsets. The Syringa berry tree (*Melia azedarach*) has a high mortality rate in affected animals, with the berries of the tree containing the highest concentration of meliatoxins. All parts of the 'Yesterday-today and tomorrow' plant can induce intoxication, but the fruit is considered to contain the most toxins. If treated early most dogs recover, but seizures and even death may set in if left untreated. The moonflower is an annual weed with spiny fruit containing small pitted seeds. Although toxicity is rare, fatal cases have been described.

The gastro intestinal system is the most common system in the body to be affected. Many plants can cause diarrhoea, vomition, bloat and cramps when ingested. Some common plants that can cause these symptoms include Chinkerinchees, often used in flower arrangements, the popular Clivia, Delicious Monster and Elephant Ears. The Arum Lily contains calcium oxalate crystals in its leaves and stems. When an animal chews on this, the sharp crystals become embedded in the mucous membranes of their mouth and tongue causing severe pain and irritation. They usually fully recover with our without supportive treatment.

Some plants cause more severe clinical signs and even possible death. The Castor Oil plant contains the toxin called risin, which most species of animals are vulnerable to. It is commonly found in fertiliser cakes and can cause death due to circulatory collapse. Another very toxic plant that causes irreversible liver damage is the Cycad. All parts of the plant are potentially poisonous, but the seeds contain the highest amount of toxin. Gastro-intestinal signs appear first and subside after a day or two only to be replaced by the development of severe liver damage which could result in death 2 weeks later due to liver failure.

Cats are the only animals susceptible to the toxin found in Day Lilies. Although it is very unusual for cats to eat plants, there have been a large number of reported cases. These Lilies contain a nephrotoxin which can cause renal failure within 24-72 hours of ingestion. Consumption of less than one leaf is capable of starting this disease process.

Plants causing cardiac signs are very prominent in farm animals in South Africa, but certain ornamental plants can cause fatal poisoning in companion animals. The most commonly encountered are the Oleander family of plants which contain a glycotoxide throughout the entire plant. Acute onset heart and respiratory failure occurs with ingestion of the plant and in certain cases secondary poisoning can occur if dogs eat the meat of sheep or goats who have died of the same intoxication.

There are many more plants that can cause possible clinical symptoms, but in most cases it depends completely on how much toxin has been ingested and how soon treatment is administered. Although plant poisoning among companion animals is quite uncommon, some do have a fatal outcome. By knowing which plants to look out for, illness and even the possible loss of a beloved animal can be prevented.