

Christmas Tree Safety

Reprinted from "Best Friends" Christmas 1996 edition published by Pets Supplies Plus as a consumer service.

Time for a reminder about the holidays and pets. While the information is aimed at cat and dog owners - the SAME cautions apply to ferrets, along with a few special additions.

Christmas trees are attractive to everyone, including dogs and cats. Unfortunately, ornaments, trimmings, and even the tree itself can be hazardous to a curious pet. By following a few common-sense precautions, you can protect your pet from tree dangers.

Tree needles - Whether you put up a natural evergreen or an artificial tree, its needles can hurt our pet's mouth and stomach if chewed and swallowed. Pine needles shed on the floor, posing an even greater temptation. Although artificial trees don't shed, their branches can be pulled off easily. It's best to keep you tree in a room that can be sealed off from our pet when you're not home! If this isn't practical, consider putting a gate around the tree or spraying it with dog or cat repellents. (Ed. Note: I don't think this will work for ferrets. But if someone has other experience, please let us all know.)

Tinsel - Probably the most hazardous Christmas decoration of all, tinsel can bunch up and block a pet's intestines if ingested, requiring the animal to undergo surgery.

Unfortunately, dogs -- and especially cats -- are strongly attracted to tinsel's glitter and stringy shape. Tinsel is best avoided in pet-owning households.

Ornaments - The safest Christmas tree decorations are one-piece ornaments made of a non-breakable, non-toxic material, which are too large for a dog to swallow. Among the most hazardous: glass ornaments, which can break in a dog's mouth (Ed. or onto the floor!); and decorations made of foodstuff such as popcorn strings and gingerbread men, since their "food" scent may attract a pet, but they often contain highly toxic paints and hardening agents.

Electric Tree Lights -- Many dogs have been electrocuted by biting through the wires on Christmas tree lights. To prevent this tragedy, if you have a young dog or one that likes to chew, coat the electric wire with a chew-guard repellent or wrap it in masking tape sticky side out. It's also a good idea to confine electric lights to heights you dog cannot reach. If you want them all over the tree, keep the lower lights away from the tips of branches, where they will be less accessible.

Editor: Lets add the following concerns unique to ferrets: Most ferrets can climb inside of a tree. Some of these little ones have no fear -- and a fall from a tree onto something dangerous below -- even just hitting a box wrong -- could cause a permanent or fatal back injury.

Avoid letting them drink the water under the tree! While I have not heard of this being fatal, tree resin is not the healthiest

of diets. I would make sure the water in a live tree is covered. If you must, try using a plastic dish or that old stand-by, duct tape, to keep little tongues out of the water.

Also, do not discount a ferret biting a wire! We all know how they LOVE new things! They may not be the least bit interested in any other wires in the house, but because it's new and very warm under a tree (*they love 'WARM, ''*), the risk is greater for them to experiment!

Of Mistletoe, holly and poinsettias - Almost all are toxic! Diarrhea, nausea, muscle spasms do not make a fun holiday! Use mistletoe cautiously (*or not at all*). It can be fatal.

Gifts For Me??? - Sad are the stories of dogs dying from eating a box of chocolates left wrapped under the tree. Well, ferrets are just as likely to get into something unsafe for them. Watch all those peanuts in packages you open. When you do open gifts, police the area carefully for any foam packaging the demons might put into their mouth.. One good suggestion is to unwrap gifts in one area and sweep or vacuum carefully afterwards. I'm not even fond of the biodegradable foam peanut packaging made from a starch-like carbohydrate. Ferrets' digestive systems are too short to break much down and nothing eaten in quantity -- except their food --- is good for them. But you can't tell a ferret something isn't good for them -- they'll eat it anyway if the spirit so moves them!

Visitors, Relatives, Strangers, & Stress - Aren't we all proud of our little ones! And don't they LOVE to be part of the action. However, when there is a houseful of people, especially those unaccustomed to ferrets, the opportunity for a baby to be stepped on, dropped or hurt in some other way increases geometrically! **Be extra cautious whenever there are groups of people around.** We all get preoccupied around the holidays and it's easy to forget our short friends below our knees.

Treats and Toys - Watch out for those treats! Ferrets do not celebrate Christmas! (For them, it's Christmas, Hanukkah, Easter, Valentine's Day, etc. EVERYDAY) - so don't feel you need to give them extra treats! Many people use the holiday's as an excuse to break away from our diets! Let's not mess up our pet's health by trying to give them tastes of everything! They do not need eggnog (and alcohol is very dangerous to our pets!); chocolate, cake or pudding with rum! Keep the cookies off the coffee table where they run. All you'll gain is a potential vet bill!

Let's keep Happy throughout the Holidays! 96