THE ORANGE COUNTY
REGISTER
PRICE: 75 CENTS | MONDAY, MARCH 29, 2010 | FOUNDED IN 1905

Easter lilies can kill cats

Our feline friends love plants. This natural attraction probably arose from their undomesticated days when their diets consisted of prey they hunted and plants they ingested – providing protein, fiber and other nutrients.

ELAINE WEXLER-MITCHELL
THE CAT DOCTOR

I am sure every cat owner wishes their pet had not chewed, pawed or crawled into their houseplants or flower arrangements at some time. I don't have any live plants in my house, but my cats even insist on chewing the silk ones! It is common for a cat to vomit after eating a plant or grass. Vomiting can be due to irritation from the plant or, more seriously, from poisonous chemicals within the leaves and stems.

An important fact to know around Easter is that although lilies are beautiful and decorative, they can kill cats. All parts of the lily plant, and the water they sit, in are potentially toxic. Easter lilies (Lilium longiflorum), tiger lilies (Lilium tigrinum), rubrum or Japanese showy lilies (Lilium speciosum and Lilium lancifolium), Narthecium ossifragum, and various day lilies (Hemerocallis), can cause life-threatening kidney failure. Calla lilies and peace lilies are not poisonous to cats.

The chemical in lilies that causes kidney failure in cats has not been identified. Fortunately other animal species do not seem to be as critically affected. There is no antidote for lily toxicosis, and unless an owner realizes within 18 hours that their cat has ingested the plant, kidney failure and death can result. Consumption of even small amounts can cause severe poisoning, so aggressive treatment is needed as soon as possible.

Vomiting, lethargy and decreased appetite are signs that can develop within a few hours of lily ingestion. If you suspect that your cat has eaten any part of a lily, take it to a veterinarian immediately. Cats can be given a drug to induce vomiting in an attempt to clear the plant material from their stomach if the ingestion has occurred within an hour or so.

Activated charcoal and a cleansing agent are administered to decrease the absorption of any remaining plant material from the gastrointestinal tract. An intravenous catheter is placed and fluid diuresis is initiated.

Diuresis is a procedure where fluids and diuretics are pumped into the body in order to flush toxins out of the bloodstream. At least 48 hours of diuresis are needed to maintain urine flow and to promote more filtering of the blood through the kidneys.

Kidney function and vital signs are monitored throughout treatment. If kidney damage is not controlled by treatment and deterioration continues, the cat may stop producing urine, and recovery is unlikely. Serious cases can be referred for full kidney dialysis through a UC Davis veterinary specialty center in north San Diego (www.ucvmc-sd.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/hemodialysis.cfm).

The renal tubular epithelial cells can regenerate if treatment is started early enough, and cats can recover completely.

The keys to success are owner recognition of their cat's possible lily exposure, and prompt, aggressive veterinary care. Cat owners should keep plants of the Liliaceae and Hemerocallis families out of their homes or gardens and enjoy the season without worry.

Dr. Wexler-Mitchell owns The Cat Care Clinic in Orange, 714-282-2287, www.catcare.com