Tracey Peake: Hello, and welcome to NC State's Audio Abstract. I'm your host, Tracey Peake. The holidays are here, and NC State's College of Veterinary Medicine wants to help you keep your pets safe and healthy during your celebrations. I'm speaking with Brenda Stevens, an Associate Clinical Professor in the Department of Clinical Sciences about hidden holiday health hazards for pets. Welcome, Brenda.

Brenda Stevens: Thank you, Tracey. Good morning. It's nice to be here.

Tracey Peake: Thanks. Well, let's start with the most obvious question: Food. When we're talking about the holidays, there's food everywhere, and pets like to partake of the goodies just as much as we do. So, what are some health hazards with foods?

Brenda Stevens: Absolutely. If you have a dog like mine, that likes to be on the counter and surfing to find the best treats, you'll know exactly what I'm talking about. There's some of the basic ones that we think about. Chocolate should be off-limits for dogs and cats, as well as alcohol. Some animals will go towards that holiday eggnog or beer that's sitting around, so we need to be careful with those. And then finally, one thing that we don't think about too much are grapes and raisins. Many people are not aware of the fact that grapes and raisins can be toxic to dogs, and it does not matter the amount. The amount seems to be individual per pet, so we really need to be careful if you have any cookies that have raisins in them, or treats or things like that.

Tracey Peake: Raisins. That's interesting. So, what if a dog has, say, snuck a treat with some raisins in it, and you are unaware? What kind of symptoms would they show if they've been poisoned by raisins?

Brenda Stevens: Right. Many times, the first thing that you'll see will be some vomiting. But further on down the line, we can see some kidney issues. So, if they do think that their pet has gotten into something with raisins or grapes in it, I would highly recommend they contact their veterinarian to see if their pet is gonna need some care, as far as making the pet vomit and having some activated charcoal, or something along those lines, to try to prevent any absorption of that.

Tracey Peake: Okay. I'm curious. What makes a grape toxic to a dog?

Brenda Stevens: Well, we really don't know, per se. We know that the thought is, is that it may have something to do with the sugars in the grapes and the raisins. But we know that some animals can tolerate them fine, but some animals can actually have some very, very serious kidney effects with them.

Tracey Peake: So it's best just to avoid it completely.

Brenda Stevens: Absolutely.

Tracey Peake: We know that cats, particularly, like to eat all your plants. They just nibble the leaves off of the plants. And so, at Christmastime we have sometimes some exotic plants, as well as trees, and other things in the house that aren't normally there. So, what should we avoid putting in the house if we have cats?

Brenda Stevens: Right. Exactly right. Some of the plants that we try to avoid ... And of course, these are the plants that we have at Christmastime ... would be mistletoe, holly, and lilies. Those are the big three that we try to avoid. Other things to think about, though, are with your Christmas tree, many people will put a preservative of some sort in the water of the Christmas tree, to try to extend the life cycle of that tree. Aspirin has been something common, and then there are some other additives. Aspirin is toxic to cats, and so we need to be very, very careful. I would highly encourage you not to put any additives in that tree water, in case your pet dog or cat does wind up licking it.

Tracey Peake: Okay, so that would also happen if you got fresh flowers. Because a lot of times, if you get flowers from companies, they send that preservative along with it. And so-

Brenda Stevens: Exactly right.

Tracey Peake: Okay. Just-

Brenda Stevens: Many times, those can be toxic to pets.

Tracey Peake: Okay. So, let your flowers wilt a little earlier, and you'll be fine.

Brenda Stevens: Exactly right.

Tracey Peake: Now, poinsettias in particular.

Brenda Stevens: The poinsettia, the leaves can be irritating for dogs and cats if they wind up chewing on them. They're not highly toxic in the fact that we get super worried about them, but they can cause some stomach upset, and some vomiting and diarrhea, and stuff that you just want to try to avoid.

Tracey Peake: What about decoration dangers? Just things that you're not necessarily ... You know, they're not necessarily going to poison your dog, food-wise ... Or cat, food-wise ... but they can harm them in some way.

Brenda Stevens: Yes. Well, if you have a Christmas tree, some people like to decorate their Christmas trees with some food products. So, gingerbread men, popcorn strands, that sort of things, and those can be highly enticing to dogs and/or cats. The other thing that we do try to stay away from with Christmas tree decorating is tinsel, the little tinsel strands. Little tinsel strands can be very attractive to cats, and cats are notorious for getting what we call a linear foreign body, which means the strip of tinsel can get stuck underneath their tongue, and then the rest of the strand passes along, and it can cause bunching of the intestines. So I would recommend if you have a cat, probably best to stay away from the tinsel, in case they do wind up eating it.

Brenda Stevens: Plus, just being careful to secure your tree, from the standpoint that cats are gonna be curious about it, your dog may be curious about it. If you have a cat like mine, your cat may climb your tree. And so, making sure that your tree is secured so it doesn't tip over. In addition, being cautious with the electrical lights on a Christmas tree or around your home, because many pets will be attracted towards chewing on the electrical cords. So, I would definitely unplug when you're not at home.

Tracey Peake: Yeah, my cats are notorious for chewing on cords.

Brenda Stevens: And I don't know why, but they love to do it.

Tracey Peake: It's very strange.

Brenda Stevens: Yeah, and they can. They can be electrocuted or they can have some very significant mouth burns, so being careful. Yes.

Tracey Peake: We're also on the road quite a bit during the holiday season, so what are some of the pitfalls of pet travel that we might need to be aware of?

Brenda Stevens: Right. I think a couple things to think about with pet travel is, one, always make sure that your pet has identification on them, as far as a collar. Microchips are great too. But I think a collar, you can have a temporary tag that has your cell phone number, so that if you're away, they're not calling your home looking for your pet. Your cats should be secured in a carrier, and that carrier should be secured in a car, as well as your dog should be secured in the car, so that they're not running about, in case you have to stop suddenly. But I do think that having identification on your pet, in case something happens, is paramount to trying to get them back.

Brenda Stevens: The other thing to think about as we're traveling, or as people are coming into our homes, is anxiety for the pets. Many pets are anxious when they're in the car. Many pets get carsick when they're in the car. Many pets can become anxious in your home when you have 30 people that they don't know, and there's music and loud, and a bunch of things going on that they're not used to. So I think it's nice, if you can, I would segregate your pets when you're having a party, so that they're in a room by themselves, the door is closed, they have their safe space. You don't have to worry about them getting scraps from all the people who love to give your dog or kitty something to eat off the table, and nobody realizes that they're the fourteenth person to give them a little bite of chicken, or something like that. As well, that they can relax and be comfortable in their surroundings.

Brenda Stevens: If you feel that your pet does have some anxiety issues, there are some medications that can help take the edge off, so you may wish to speak to your veterinarian about what would be best for your pet.

Tracey Peake: To help them kind of ease through the holidays.

Brenda Stevens: Exactly right.

Tracey Peake: What is the weirdest thing you've ever seen a dog or a cat consume, that's holiday-related?

Brenda Stevens: One of the funniest things that I saw was, we had a Husky when I was in practice up in Connecticut. And around the time, they had these toys called Pound Puppies and Pound Kittens, which was a dog or a cat, and then they had little puppies or kittens inside. They unzipped, and part of the surprise was you didn't know how many puppies or kittens were gonna come out. Apparently, a little girl was playing with her Pound Kitten, and I don't know if she got some food on it or something like that, but the dog wound up eating the Pound Cat. And the best part was, when we took the x-ray to see what the dog had eaten, we saw three beautiful little kittens looking at us from inside the dog's stomach.

Tracey Peake: Very nice.

Brenda Stevens: Yes. Fortunately it all worked out well, and we were able to extract the kittens from the dog. But it was a learning experience, I think for all of us, and I still have a picture of that x-ray, because having three little kittens looking at you was just-

Tracey Peake: From the stomach of a dog.

Brenda Stevens: Exactly right.

Tracey Peake: Excellent. Well, and you know, it's another sort of cautionary tale. The dog's fine, but that is an unexpected holiday expense that you may not want to be looking at this time of year.

Brenda Stevens: Exactly right. And if you had asked me would I have thought the dog was gonna eat that, I would have probably said no. So, always erring on the side of caution, being that we're not really sure what our pets are gonna do sometimes, so being careful and trying to pick things up.

Tracey Peake: Are there any particular issues that might affect exotic pets, pets that we don't think of when we think of dogs or cats? Like hamsters, or turtles, or birds, or lizards, that kind of thing?

Brenda Stevens: Yeah. I think one of the things is, is making sure that these pets are secure. Especially some of the birds can be sensitive to temperature changes. If you have people coming into your house and the door is open, making sure that the bird is in an area where it can stay warm, or whatever the temperature that that bird likes to be at. And also, making sure that folks aren't feeding them things that they normally would not eat. A lot of people, you know, we express love by food, and we might feed our pet something a little bit different than they're used to eating. So, being careful that your guests know that your exotic pets, whichever they are, have a specific diet or a specific temperature that they need to stay at, and we shouldn't be messing with them too much.

Tracey Peake: Is there anything else that we haven't covered?

Brenda Stevens: One other thing that can happen is, especially if we're making breads and that sort of thing, is dough, and especially yeast doughs. When doughs are rising, many dogs can become attracted to that, and eat that. The problem with dough, as it is expanding ... One is that a small amount of dough can become a large amount of dough inside this dog's stomach. In addition, it can metabolize into some forms of alcohol. Or ferment, essentially, and cause a secondary problem where the dog can become inebriated, due to the alcohol content. So the yeast dough, be careful. If you're proofing it ... In a microwave, in your oven, or some place where the dog can't get it.

Tracey Peake: We don't want dough drunk dogs.

Brenda Stevens: We do not want the dough drunk dogs.

Tracey Peake: Yes, indeed. Well, thank you very much for being here, Brenda. I'm sure this will be helpful to folks. Stuff to keep in mind, while we're celebrating this holiday season.

Brenda Stevens: I hope so. The goal always is for everybody to have a great holiday, and that includes our pets.

Tracey Peake: I've been speaking with Brenda Stevens, an Associate Clinical Professor in the Department of Clinical Sciences, here at NC State's College of Veterinary Medicine. I'm Tracey Peake. This has been Audio Abstract. Thanks so much for listening.