Just in time for the holidays come two studies on our canine companions that serve as a reminder and warning.

Most, if not all pet owners know that chocolate is harmful to dogs. Theobromine, in the caffeine family of chemicals, is found in varying degrees in chocolate and causes vomiting, agitation and even seizures in dogs. Dogs are unaware of this food problem and will readily scarf down any rogue chocolates that come their way. A study [1] in Vet Record, a United Kingdom publication, reviewed electronic health records of 229 practices in the Small Animal Veterinary Surveillance Network. Chocolate exposure, (you have to admire some of our phrasings) was reported in a vanishingly small number of cases, roughly 400 in a database of 2.7 million doggy encounters. Among their chocolate exposure findings:

- Christmas was the most likely time of exposure with almost five times the occurrence as non-holidays. It was closely followed by Easter with a doubling of chocolate exposure.
- Valentine’s Day and Halloween did not show any increase. Whether this represents a lack of chocolate purchases by owners or a more successful hoarding is unknown.
- All breeds were chocolate eaters, no specific chocolate hounds were identified.
- Dog age did matter, older dogs (4 years or greater) were less likely to imbibe.
- Chocolate choices included bars, boxed treats, chocolate rabbits and Santas and my personal favorite — a cache of chocolate Easter eggs meant to be discovered by ‘the children’ later in the day. Dogs are equal opportunity chocolate eaters and the early dog gets the eggs.
- Although all of these incidents resulted in trips to the veterinarian, no dogs were harmed, vomiting was the most frequent symptom.
Unfortunately, I have more bad news for Loki and Juno, my two dogs and for many others. A second paper [2], once again in Vet Record, indicates that dog treats have too many calories. Dog treats are the fastest growing segment of pet food. Treats are defined by the European Union as ‘complementary feed’ that by "reason of its composition, is sufficient for a daily ration only if used in combination with other feed." They note that treats are a “risk factor for the development of excess body fat in dogs.” (I suspect we could substitute people for dogs and meaning would remain the same.) And should you doubt the problem, it is estimated [3] that 59% of cats and 54% of dogs are overweight or obese in the U.S.

Among the facts and findings;

It was recommended that treats account for only 10% of doggy diet energy needs [1]. For a small dog that is 40 calories, a medium dog 70 calories and for a large dog 120 calories. (I am not at all sure how dog calorie needs were calculated)

Nutritional labeling for dogs, despite their inability to read, is similar to that for humans, at least in the U.S. In this study, which looked at Italy, labeling is more generalized e.g. cereal instead of wheat. And U.S. labels, like those for humans, carry calorie counts. (Who knew? Go ahead and check)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treat</th>
<th>% of daily caloric intake based upon package feeding instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biscuit</td>
<td>»16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenders (a moist biscuit)</td>
<td>»10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meat strips</td>
<td>»10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rawhides [2]</td>
<td>»25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chewable sticks</td>
<td>»12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dental sticks</td>
<td>»8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on these findings not only is chocolate off the list, but rawhides and biscuits may soon follow. That leaves only dental sticks as a weight loss treat and we all know how yummy parsley can be.

In a remarkable parallel with human treats the researchers conclude that treat labeling should provide more information on ingredients, that serving size should be reduced and that care should be taken for dogs with specific ingredient sensitivities or medical conditions.

A nice after dinner walk for both master and dog may be appropriate this holiday season.
[1] This figure is from World Small Animal Veterinary Association guidelines

[2] This is Juno’s personal favorite, Loki is more of an omnivore and considers all food good.

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