

NEWSLETTER



Rat Poison

On a recent Monday evening, I saw a lovely patient, lets call her “Alex”. Alex came in to have a new lump on her throat checked. Her owner had only noticed the lump the previous day or so. For us, ‘lump checks’ are usually routine, especially in Retriever breeds in middle age. They may come up quickly, and are frequently soft and movable.

The only way to know for certain if a lump is ‘benign’ (not a problem for now) or if it is pathologic, is by ‘aspirating’ it with a small needle and removing some cells to examine under the microscope.

Alex’s lump was the size of a Kiwi fruit and on the right size of her neck. Imagine my extraordinary surprise to find this lump filled with blood that would not clot.

There are several different medical reasons why Alex might have experienced a large hemorrhage. Fortunately for Alex we diagnosed her toxic exposure quickly. When questioned about rat poison, her owner immediately remembered that her dogs did have access to rat poison at home and that she had witnessed one of the dogs with the poison in its mouth.

Rodenticides, are poisons that are used to kill rats and mice. **Unfortunately, the poison in the rodenticide that kills the pests can also kill your pets or your children!** The most common toxin sold in rodenticides is called warfarin. After ingestion of the toxin over time it prevents clotting of blood. Even a small bump can cause a life threatening hemorrhage or death.

Treatment of patients exposed to these poisons may include plasma or whole blood transfusions, and Vitamin K supplementation for a month. Monitoring blood counts and prothrombin times may also be necessary during convalescence. As you may imagine, treatment can be quite expensive.

The Baltimore Sun recently reported (March 31, 2010, “City Joins Effort to Reduce Pests Without Pesticides”) that the City of Baltimore is beginning a new initiative to reduce ‘pests’ minimizing the use of pesticides. Called the “Safe Pest Management for Health Initiative”, the city hopes to reduce pests using more environmentally friendly techniques.



Suggestions from the Illinois Department of Public Health include:

- Keep trash cans, pet food containers and any other source of food (bird seed) closed tightly and securely in metal containers.
- Seal cracks and openings where rodents can gain access to your home. Check carefully around utility conduits, doors, and windows. Rats and mice can gain entrance to a building through any opening larger than 1/4 inch across.
- Be certain that drains have tight fitting grates with openings no larger than 1/4 inches in diameter.
- Remove debris in the environment that could provide shelter, especially near pet enclosures.

For removing rodents already present:

- It is unlikely that sound of any type will drive established rats from buildings.
 - Trapping **is** an effective method of control. Use enough traps to eliminate rats quickly.
 - Bait traps with peanut butter, bacon, hot dog or dried fruit. Set them close to walls behind objects and in dark corners in places where a rat will pass over the trigger as it travels.
 - Remember that traps will only work if the environment has been prepared to prevent reinfestation.
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- Always wear rubber gloves when handling dead rats.
 - Dispose dead animals into containers with tight fitting lids.
 - Wash gloves with household disinfectant or soap and water, and then wash hands with soap and water.
 - You can disinfect the areas contaminated by rodents with 3 tablespoons of bleach in a gallon of water.

If you think that your pet might have had exposure to a rodenticide, obtain the package information and call poison control immediately. There are several types of rodenticide poisons and poison control must know the toxin used in order to determine the correct treatment.

The number for the ASPCA animal poison control center is: **(888) 426-4435** There may be a \$65 fee charged for the phone call. They are staffed with veterinarians who are specially trained in animal toxicology.

We can always make the call for you as long as we have the package information. Usually, we will want to see your pet to induce vomiting if the exposure has just occurred, or to give preventative medication or treatment as warranted.

I also want to make an important distinction here between the wild Norway rat or sewer rat and the pet rats that I often see as patients. Sewer rats do spread disease by nature of the bacteria in the environment where they live.

The pet rats that we see in our practice are very curious, loving pets that are a big part of many families. They are great pets! They are no more likely to spread disease than a pet gerbil or guinea pig.