LILY TOXICITY (EASTER LILY POISONING)

What is it? Plants in the Lilium genus and Hermocallis genus are highly toxic to cats. All lily species are toxic including Easter Lilies, Day Lilies, Tiger Lilies, Day Lilies, Stargazer Lilies and Asiatic Lilies. Peace Lilies and Calla Lilies are not “true lilies” and they do not cause the same problems that the true lily species do. Ingestion of leaves, flowers, stems, and even pollen can cause severe kidney problems and may even be fatal. Both fresh and dried plants are toxic. The toxic dose has not been determined but symptoms can occur with ingestion of less than one leaf. The toxic principle of these plants is not known, but the ASPCA Poison Control Center states that lilies are the number one most poisonous plant for pets.

What animals are affected? Lily ingestion can cause kidney failure in cats. Dogs may experience gastrointestinal upset but they do not experience the same severe kidney problems that cats do.

What are the signs? There may be a sudden onset of vomiting, depression, and anorexia within 2-4 hours of ingestion of plant parts or pollen. These early symptoms may be due to direct irritation of the gastrointestinal tract. These symptoms are followed by increased urination and dehydration, with kidney problems developing as early as 12-24 hours after exposure. Kidney failure usual begins within 2-5 days of ingestion. Cats may begin vomiting again as kidney failure develops, and they may stop producing urine.

How is it diagnosed? Diagnosis is based on a history of exposure or witnessing ingestion of the plants. There are no known specific diagnostic tests to screen for Lily toxicity. Baseline blood work may reveal elevated kidney enzymes (BUN and Creatinine), elevated Phosphorous, and elevated Potassium. Urine is often dilute and there may be casts in the urine that indicate kidney damage.

How is it treated? If exposure is witnessed and medical intervention can be initiated early (within 4 hours of ingestion), decontamination is recommended. This process may consist of emptying the stomach and administering activated charcoal to help reduce absorption of additional toxin from the gastrointestinal tract. IV fluid therapy is recommended for at least 24-48 hours to help support the kidneys. Kidney enzymes and other blood work should be monitored as well. In pets that develop kidney failure, hospitalization for IV fluids, supportive care, and monitoring may be needed for several days to support kidney function and to allow the kidneys to recover.

What after care is needed? Follow up blood work is needed to monitor kidney values and electrolytes. If there is permanent kidney damage, additional treatments such as subcutaneous fluid therapy at home and special kidney diets may be recommended.
What is the prognosis? If the stomach is emptied and the pet is “decontaminated” early, the prognosis is excellent. If enough toxin is ingested to cause kidney failure, the prognosis is guarded to poor.

Can it be prevented? Yes – prevention is the best medicine! Keep lilies away from cats and consider choosing a different type of plant or flower for your home if you have cats.

For more information regarding lily toxicity and to review photos of poisonous plants, see the Cat Fanciers’ Association website.