

Most people know that when a child is sick or painful, a dose of Tylenol or ibuprofen will help start them on the road to recovery. However, the same is not true for dogs and cats. Medications that are commonly used in humans for pain and fever can be deadly when given to pets.

The term “NSAID” (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug) is used to describe medications such as Advil (ibuprofen), Aleve (naproxen), and aspirin. Tylenol (acetaminophen) is used to relieve many of the same symptoms, but it is classified as a mild analgesic rather than an NSAID, as it does not have the same anti-inflammatory effects as the NSAIDs. All of these medications can be toxic to dogs and cats and should not be given without specific instructions from a veterinarian.

Aspirin can be used to treat pain in dogs; however, there is a significant danger of overdose, and it is recommended that you speak with your veterinarian about the correct dosage before administering it to your dog. Cats do not possess the enzymes necessary to properly metabolize aspirin, and it is therefore extremely toxic to cats. Signs of aspirin overdose include vomiting, diarrhea, and gastric ulcers.

Acetaminophen is sometimes prescribed in combination with codeine to dogs; however, it is not recommended that clients give the over-the-counter tablets to dogs, as unknowingly giving high doses can easily cause toxicity. Cats, again, do not possess the proper enzymes to metabolize acetaminophen, and it is extremely toxic to cats. Even a small dose of Tylenol can be enough to kill a cat. Signs of an acetaminophen overdose include an upset stomach (at lower doses) and may progress to liver failure, signs of which can include vomiting, lethargy, and bruising or bleeding.

Ibuprofen and naproxen are toxic to both dogs and cats, and should never be administered. Older dogs may be more prone to naproxen toxicosis than younger dogs. Signs of an overdose include vomiting and gastric ulcers at lower doses. Higher doses may cause kidney failure to occur, leading to increased thirst and urination, dehydration, and death.

If your dog or cat has ingested any of the above medications, please call your veterinarian’s office immediately. They can calculate the toxic dosage of the medication and discuss what further steps might need to be taken. Inducing vomiting without the direction of your veterinarian is not advised, as it may cause aspiration of stomach contents and could worsen stomach ulcers. If you are directed to bring your animal to the veterinarian’s office, you can expect them to induce vomiting if the animal has ingested the drug in the past hour. If the time of ingestion is unknown or longer than an hour, blood work will be taken to determine whether there has been damage to the liver and/or kidneys. The animal will likely receive IV fluids, activated charcoal to absorb any toxin left in the GI tract, and gastroprotectants (medications that coat the stomach and reduce acid formation). In the case of acetaminophen intoxication, there are some specific medications that will be given as well to reduce the toxic effects of the medication.

While some over-the-counter medications are safe and effective when used in dogs and cats,

many more are toxic. Always call your veterinarian's office before administering any human medications to your pets.