

## A Vet Would Know That

by Celeste Abell

### Is Your Purse Toxic?

Lately, several compelling stories have circulated the web about the dangers of the artificial sweetener, Xylitol, an ingredient found in many sugar-free gums, candies, chocolates, mints, toothpastes, baked goods and artificial sweeteners. Here is one of those stories:

*Last Friday evening, I arrived home from work and fed Chloe our 24 lb. dachshund. Ten minutes later I walked into the den just in time to see her head inside my purse. She had a guilty look on her face so I looked closer and saw a small half-eaten package of Orbit sugar-free gum. I remembered reading that some sugar-free gums contain Xylitol, which can be deadly for dogs. I jumped online to see if that brand of gum contained Xylitol. It did.*

*I called our vet and was told to bring Chloe in immediately. It was rush hour and would take more than half an hour to get to their office. In the interim, our vet found another website with treatment options since, like many vets, she'd never had a dog with Xylitol poisoning before. When we arrived, she whisked Chloe away, made her vomit and gave her a charcoal drink to absorb any remaining toxin (even though they don't know with certainty that it helps). Next, they started her on an IV containing dextrose. Xylitol causes dogs to secrete excess insulin so their blood sugar drops very quickly. It is also toxic to the liver, and if enough is present in the blood, can cause liver failure. The vet said she would call us.*

*Almost two hours later, she phoned and said Chloe's stomach contained 2-3 gum wrappers and that her blood sugar had dropped from 90 to 59 in 30 minutes; 100 is normal. She wanted to move Chloe to another hospital that had an around-the-clock critical care unit. We picked her up and drove her to the next hospital. They had us call the ASPCA poison control center for a case number and for a donation. Their doctors advised Chloe's new doctor on treatment. They were told to continue the IV, monitor her blood glucose every other hour and test her liver function in two days. She ended up with a central line in her jugular vein since the one in her leg collapsed, just as my regular vet thought might happen.*

*Chloe spent the entire weekend in critical care. After her blood sugar had stabilized, she came home. They ran blood tests just before she was released and found no sign of liver damage. Had I not seen her head in my purse, she probably would have died, and we would never have ever known why. Several vets told me we were lucky I had heard about Xylitol since they hadn't encountered it before. Please tell everyone you know about the danger of Xylitol to dogs. It could save another life.*

While the exact origin of this story cannot be verified, the account is very plausible and has a happier ending than most. Both the [American Veterinary Medical Association \(AVMA\)](#) and the [ASPCA's Animal Poison Control Center](#) have reported a marked rise in the number of fatal Xylitol poisonings since 2004 – largely due to an

increasing number of products containing this artificial sweetener. According to ASPCA toxicologist, Dr. Eric Dunayer, dogs that ingest even minimal amounts of Xylitol are at risk of developing a sudden drop in blood sugar, often in as little as 30 minutes.<sup>1</sup> Larger amounts of Xylitol are toxic to the liver and can cause acute liver failure.<sup>2</sup> Symptoms of Xylitol poisoning are depression, loss of coordination and seizures, but given how rapidly Xylitol acts to drop a dog's blood sugar, it is imperative to get your dog to a veterinarian quickly. Why is blood sugar so important? Simply put, cells don't have enough energy to function when there isn't sufficient glucose. In extreme cases, called hypoglycemia, vital systems start shutting down.

To help your pet's chance of survival, you need to get the Xylitol out of their system quickly. In the story above, Chloe's owner could have induced vomiting before going to the vet's office. It is a simple thing to do with items already in your medicine cabinet or doggie first aid kit. For a 20 pound dog, draw up 3 ml of 3% hydrogen peroxide into a syringe (2.25 ml for a 15 lb. dog). Squirt it into the back of their throat and make sure they swallow. Within 10 minutes, you should be on the road to the vet and your dog should have brought up whatever he or she ate. As unlovely a visual as this is, show your vet what they regurgitated. It may help with treatment decisions. If you think your dog ingested the Xylitol more than 2 hours earlier, whatever they ate has moved past the stomach and into the intestines. Making them vomit sadly will not help.

The best approach to preventing accidental poisoning involves five steps: 1) make sure you have your vet's number handy so you can ask whether its appropriate to induce vomiting – not all ingested substances should be brought back up; 2) keep your doggie first aid kit readily available and stocked with fresh 3% hydrogen peroxide – replace it twice a year since it easily loses its potency and never use the type of peroxide that comes with hair coloration kits; 3) using the syringe, practice drawing up the right amount of hydrogen peroxide for your dog's weight; 4) weigh your dog so you know how much hydrogen peroxide to give; and 5) routinely perform an ingredient sweep of potentially toxic items in your purse and other accessible areas of your home and car. Besides Xylitol, the AVMA suggests you keep the following items well out of canine reach: coffee, tea bags, caffeinated sodas, chocolate, alcohol, salt, garlic, onions, macadamia nuts, yeast and yeast dough, avocados, grapes, raisins, and over the counter/prescription meds.<sup>3</sup> Your dog and family will thank you for your diligence.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.aspc.org/site/PageServer?pagename=press\\_082106](http://www.aspc.org/site/PageServer?pagename=press_082106).

<sup>2</sup> Dunayer, E.K., Gwaltney-Brant, S.M. (2006) Acute hepatic failure and coagulopathy associated with Xylitol ingestion in eight dogs, *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* (229)7:1113-1117.

<sup>3</sup> [www.avma.org/animal\\_health/brochures/hazards/household\\_brochure .pdf](http://www.avma.org/animal_health/brochures/hazards/household_brochure.pdf).

Celeste Abell is not a veterinarian, but is working toward becoming one. If you have a question you want investigated, please email Celeste at [avwkt@clientfirst.net](mailto:avwkt@clientfirst.net). As a reminder, always check with your vet before adding or changing any aspect of care you give your Schnauzer.