

Ask A Vet: Rat Bait can Hurt Pests and Pets

Sunday, October 26, 2014

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

With fall upon us and cooler weather I have recently found evidence of mice in my basement. I have two dogs and a cat who might occasionally have access to the basement. I know rat/mouse poison can be dangerous to my pets but it is also the most effective means to exterminate these pests. What are your thoughts? Just how dangerous is it? Can my pets get sick by eating poisoned mice?

Dear Reader,

Rat poison or rodenticide toxicity in dogs and cats make up more cases in veterinary clinics than all other types of toxicity combined. There is good reason why these toxins are so effective for pest control, and they are just as dangerous for our pets. Most rat or mouse poisons use toxins called anticoagulants, which slow or abolish the body's ability to form blood clots and stop bleeding. Over time, small bleeds that are normally clotted and repaired quickly by the body go unchecked and the bleeding continues internally. The overall effect on the entire body over a few days is an animal that eventually bleeds to death. Unfortunately in many cases, we are unaware that a pet has ingested some of the poison until we see symptoms such as tarry stools, weakness, pale gums, difficulty breathing, and shock.

The good news is that there is a very effective antidote. Rat poison works by making the body unable to re-use vitamin K, which is an essential component in the formation of a blood clot. So, by continually supplementing vitamin K we can keep the animal clotting until the poison is gone. If this therapy is started soon enough and continued long enough most animals can be saved. In some severe cases blood transfusions may be necessary to supply clotting factors and extra red blood cells. Many types of rat poison can last for several weeks in the body, so it may be necessary to continue vitamin K of this period of time. One other important note on the vitamin K therapy is that it should be pharmaceutical grade Vit K1, and not the over the counter Vit K3.

In some more fortunate situations, when a pet is actually seen ingesting poison or is known to have just eaten it, vomiting can be induced to get rid of the poison before it is absorbed into the body. If this is the case, call your veterinarian immediately for advice as sometimes household products such as hydrogen peroxide can be used to induce vomiting.

The topic of pets getting sick from eating already poisoned mice or rats is also important and probably accounts for many of the cases that go undiagnosed. Although it is difficult for a dog or cat to get enough toxin this way, it is possible. The most common instances would be barn cats or "ratter" dogs whose temporary diet may consist of a large portion of rodents.

The best bet for folks that have pets is to avoid using rat poison at all. If you must, please keep your pets locked out of the entire area until the rodent problem is gone and you have picked up all the poison. If you have the slightest suspicion at all that your pet may have gotten into it, even with no symptoms, give your vet a call. Remember these toxins can take days to have any effect, so don't gain a false sense of security just because "Fido" seems fine at the moment. Being proactive and starting antidote treatment immediately is imperative.

-Dr. Justin Sellon