

Snack bags pose suffocation risk to pets

By Katie Burns

Few people think a snack bag could suffocate a dog or a cat, until the unthinkable occurs.

The dog or cat puts its head inside a bag of chips or another snack, and the bag tightens when the pet inhales. The pet can suffocate to death in under five minutes.

Dr. Jason Nicholas, president and chief medical officer at Preventive Vet, is trying to spread word about the risk. He founded Preventive Vet to raise awareness of preventable risks to pets after he spent years working full time in emergency and critical care. The company offers an online pet health and safety resource and sells books providing tips for canine and feline health and safety.

"I have just seen too much in the emergency room that either it doesn't end well or you wind up with really distraught and financially strapped owners," said Dr. Nicholas, who continues to do relief work in Portland, Oregon.

The issue of snack bags suffocating pets came to his attention through a story on social media. He reached out to the woman who lost her dog, and they made a video about the issue. He also posted a survey on the Preventive Vet website to gather data from people whose pets have suffocated in snack bags.

According to 1,354 respondents from 2014-18, 72 percent of dogs or cats suffocated in chip or snack bags, 11 percent in bags for pet food or treats, 6 percent in liners for cereal boxes, and 11 percent in bread bags, plastic containers, or something else.



About 25 percent of the bags or containers had been in or near the garbage, 22 percent on a coffee or side table, 13 percent on the counter, 6 percent outside, 6 percent on the kitchen or dining table, 3 percent in or near the recycling bin, 20 percent in other known locations, and 5 percent in unknown locations.

Thirty-nine percent of respondents were home when the pet suffocated. Of those who were out, 18 percent were gone for less than 15 minutes.

Dr. Nicholas said the stories that he hears from guilt-ridden pet owners are devastating. One dog owner was suicidal, but Dr. Nicholas' business partner contacted suicide prevention experts, who intervened.

Preventive Vet created a free poster with data from the suffocation survey and solutions to prevent the risk. The suggestions are to store food in plastic containers with an opening too small for a pet's head, serve snacks in a bowl rather than eating them out of a

Eleanor, Petey, and Teddy are among the dogs who have suffocated to death in chip bags.

bag, and cut bags along one side and

the bottom before disposal.

Other approaches are to tie bags in a knot before disposal or tear or cut open at least one side or the bottom, Dr. Nicholas said. He also advised putting trash in covered bins behind doors.

"We were taught to cut six-pack rings to protect wildlife," notes a Preventive Vet graphic for sharing on Facebook. "Now let's cut our snack bags to save wildlife and our pets."

Suffocation doesn't happen only to small pets. In the survey, more than 55 percent of dogs that suffocated weighed more than 30 pounds, and 17 percent weighed more than 60 pounds.

Dr. Jennifer Hamm, medical director of East Bay Veterinary Emergency in Antioch, California, learned that pets could suffocate in snack bags

Photos courtesy of Preventive Vet

when a cousin's cat, Mojo, suffocated to death in a bag of chips.

Her cousin lived with a couple of other guys, and they all left chip bags around. They woke up one day to a dead cat. Dr. Hamm's cousin called to tell her and ask questions. She realized the cat had suffocated.

In the past year, a young female Corgi came into Dr. Hamm's emergency hospital dead on arrival. Dr. Hamm asked the owner what had happened, and he could barely speak. He had found the dog lying on his bed with a chip bag over her head.

Now, anytime Dr. Hamm hears from clients about a pet getting into the trash, she cautions them about the risk of suffocation from chip bags. She said, "It is so preventable, and it's just so gut-wrenching when it happens."

According to the survey of people whose pets have suffocated in food bags or containers, 87 percent didn't know about the danger until the pet suffocated. Preventive Vet has dedicated a webpage to awareness at www.preventivevet.com/pet-suffocation, where the free poster, shareable materials for social media, and other resources are available. 🍌

USDA ends swine coronavirus data collection

Department of Agriculture officials have stopped requiring reports when pigs become infected with enteric coronaviruses.

Since June 2014, the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service had required reports on swine herds confirmed to have pigs infected or reinfected with porcine epidemic diarrhea, porcine deltacoronavirus, or any other novel coronaviruses. Agency officials collected 3,900 reports of PED infections and 600 of porcine deltacoronavirus infections before removing the reporting requirement March 6.

PED emerged in U.S. herds in April 2013. It had spread to 30 states and killed about 7 million neonatal pigs when APHIS implemented the reporting requirements in June 2014. A report published in March by the USDA showed that the number of new infections has risen every winter and bottomed out every summer, but those spikes have been smaller in each of the past three years.

The agency also confirmed the U.S. presence of porcine deltacoronavirus

in February 2014. That virus tends to cause milder clinical signs and fewer deaths.

The agency began requiring reports from herd owners, herd managers, veterinarians, or diagnostic laboratories to gain basic disease information, according to the federal order. An increasing number of infections, eroding confidence among stakeholders, and discovery of the second coronavirus showed the harm caused by the absence of such information.

The order also required, for herds with infected pigs, management plans that addressed biosecurity, observation, cleaning, disinfection, diagnostic testing, and record keeping.

Dr. Tom Burkgren, executive director of the American Association of Swine Veterinarians, said infection data reported weekly from APHIS tended to arrive too slowly to be useful. The swine industry supported rescinding the order, he said.

Dr. Burkgren said the Morrison Swine Health Monitoring Program at the University of Minnesota continues collecting and reporting PED data. 🍌

Clarification

The photos on pages 906 and 907 of the April 15 article "A one-health solution to the toxic algae problem" are not characteristic of harmful algal blooms caused by cyanobacteria. Rather, they appear to be green filamentous algae, which can pose an indirect threat to aquatic animals by rendering water hypoxic, especially at night or when the organisms die. It is important to the protection of human and animal health to be able to recognize the gross

appearance of cyanobacteria. The two photos here are of HABs caused by cyanobacteria at lakes in Minnesota and New York. The blue color of cyanobacterial blooms, which is often most evident at the shoreline, develops as the organisms degenerate. Microscopic examinations of cyanobacterial cells and cyanobacterial toxin analyses by individuals with expertise in this area are also of great value. 🍌

Photo by Doug Conroe,
Chautauqua Lake Association



Photo by Dan Fellig, Minnesota
Pollution Control Agency