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Well

Tara Parker-Pope on Health

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## How the Doctor Almost Killed Her Dog

By *RANDI HUTTER EPSTEIN, M.D.*

The week before Christmas, I nearly killed my German shepherd.

His name is Dexter, and he's 11 years old. It all began on a Saturday morning in Central Park, when he ran in playful pursuit after a young Labrador retriever. Afterward he limped home.

Yet again his arthritic leg was acting up — he also tore a ligament a few years ago — and in an effort to save money and a trip to the veterinarian, I gave him some high-dose ibuprofen. It was in the medicine cabinet, left over from my son's root canal.

I am a doctor — a people one — so I know quite a bit about medicine. Little did I know how little I knew about veterinary medicine.

Over the course of about a day and half, I had given Dexter three 600-milligram pills. He stopped limping, but also stopped eating, and for the first time in his life, he wet himself during the night. He then flooded the hallway with urine as he ran for the door in the morning.

That's when I called the veterinarian's office. It was Sunday, and I left a message saying that it wasn't an emergency, but perhaps Dexter should be seen on Monday.

The phone rang immediately. It was my veterinarian. She told me to get Dexter to an animal hospital. Right away.

That's when I learned that ibuprofen, the key ingredient in Motrin, poisons dogs. After a seven-day stay in the intensive care unit, ultrasound exams and a big bottle of take-home medicine, I brought Dexter home, along with a \$3,000 vet bill.

My kids could not believe that I had given the family dog medicine made for humans. My 14-year-old son had the gall to make fun of me in front of his friends. "My dog was in the hospital. My mom almost killed him. Can you believe she gave him people medicine?"

But my dogs have had a long — and happier — history of human-drug therapy, all veterinarian-approved. Dexter also takes glucosamine, a supplement for arthritic joints that my mother swears by. He takes levothyroid for his slow-acting thyroid gland, precisely the same thing people take. And when he has digestive issues, which is fairly frequently, I reach for the Pepcid and Imodium, an over-the-counter antidiarrheal

medicine.

When my previous dog, a golden retriever, had lymphoma years ago, he was treated with the same chemotherapy regime given to human cancer patients.

And to be honest, I had never worried too much, because I thought so many of the pet dangers we hear about are exaggerated. Take chocolate: They say it kills dogs, but my dogs have always scarfed down the chocolate crumbs my kids have dropped without consequences.

Dr. Safdar Khan, senior director of toxicology research at the [A.S.P.C.A. Animal Poison Control Center](#), which runs a [24-hour hot line for pet owners](#) (1-888-426-4435; fees apply), urged pet owners, “You must, must check with your vet” before giving pets human medicines. Imodium, for example, can mask underlying causes of diarrhea, like parasites. And drugs like Pepto Bismol contain aspirin, he said, which can irritate a dog’s digestive tract and cause severe damage to cats.

But ibuprofen “is a double whammy,” said Dr. Amy Attas, my vet and founder of City Pets, a veterinary house call service. It can cause ulcers and bleeding in the intestinal tract and damage the kidneys. High doses can cause fatal renal failure.

There are many other canine poisons in the medicine cabinet as well. Acetaminophen, the key ingredient in Tylenol, is toxic to dogs and cats because the liver enzyme responsible for its breakdown works differently in cats and dogs than it does in people. One dose can kill a cat.

And as for chocolate, a few chocolate bits or a chocolate chip cookie is not going to kill your dog, Dr. Attas said. But lots of dark chocolate, the kind often used in baking, can be deadly. It has a caffeinelike ingredient that damages the canine central nervous system.

Other foods to avoid: grapes and raisins can lead to kidney failure. A lot of onions — say, if a dog gets into the garbage and eats the onion-covered chicken — can prompt anemia, which can be fatal. And macadamia nuts can cause muscle tremors, weakness, vomiting and dangerously high body temperatures.

The worst, Dr. Attas said, are artificial sweeteners. Xylitol, the ingredient in most sugar-free gums, causes sugar levels to plummet in dogs, and may damage their livers too. In a paper in the *Journal of the Veterinary Medical Association*, [researchers reported the death](#) of four of eight dogs that had eaten xylitol-laden desserts.

Dr. Attas also warned that Easter lilies are poisonous to cats.

So what do you give a dog when joint pain flares up?

Your veterinarian may recommend a medicine called Rimadyl, a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug that works in dogs but, wouldn’t you know, is toxic for people.

As for Dexter, it's been about a month and he's on the mend. He's still on antibiotics twice a day and needs to be walked about every three hours.

The bottom line is that while your domesticated pets may act like small children and your children may, at times, act like wild animals, when it comes to health care, they should always be considered different species.

In other words, don't do what I did. Call your vet before you experiment with your pets. You could spare yourself a medical crisis – and a hefty bill.

*Randi Hutter Epstein is the author of “Get Me Out: A History of Childbirth from the Garden of Eden to the Sperm Bank.”*