Rat Poison

Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker, and today we’re going to discuss poisoning, specifically rat and mice baits.

This fall, I saw a series of animals at my animal hospital that had been poisoned. What typically happens is that as the cooler weather comes about, vermin (mice and rodents) can enter our homes to try to stay warm, and your pets can come across them. This oftentimes leads to people baiting in their homes. This means they put out rat and mice bait, assuming that your dogs and cats will not or couldn’t get into them. Oftentimes despite your best efforts at hiding rat and mice bait around your home, pets can still get into them. So it’s important to know what to do if you believe that your pet has acquired toxicosis from rodent bait.

Rat and mice baits both contain a common toxin called warfarin. Warfarin is an anticoagulant that prevents the body from forming clots. What happens is that the animals – even rats and mice – don’t have any symptoms immediately.

How Warfarin Toxicosis Occurs

This bait is put in a palatable grain. Mice and rats are pretty keen in sensing any problems with the food — if it doesn’t taste bad, they eat small amounts of the poison. They don’t die immediately; they wander off and then 24-48 hours later, warfarin inhibits the clotting ability in their bodies and they end up bleeding out. Because the mice and rats wander off, you typically don’t find them directly right in front where the bait is. They go off and die somewhere else.

The same thing can happen to your pets. If they consume bait with warfarin, cats and dogs initially don’t have any symptoms. This is where part of the frustration and overwhelming sadness can come about. Your pets don’t throw up and don’t act sick. In fact, you oftentimes don’t even know that they’ve consumed the bait containing warfarin.

Signs and Symptoms

Some of the symptoms that can come about if your pet has consumed warfarin can be pale gums, bleeding from the nose, and bleeding from the GI tract, which can cause blood in the urine and feces. Sometimes animals can bleed out into their abdomen, so they have a swollen belly. There’s lethargy and weakness, where the animal can appear overwhelmingly tired. There are not a lot of clear-cut symptoms, which can lead people to believe, “You know, my dog or cat...
is just having a day under the weather. Everything’s going to be fine,” when oftentimes they’re already in the process of dying.

**Primary and Secondary Toxicosis**

Because there are two main ways for animals to be poisoned, you need to think about both of them. Even if you would never consider having rodent bait in your home, you must realize that your dogs and cats aren’t necessarily not at risk. They can still be at risk despite the fact that you have no poisons at home.

Secondary toxicosis can become a real problem. Even at my house we don’t bait, but our dogs and cats both have had exposure to toxins because we live in a farming community and other people bait. Those mice and rats can come over to our property. Rodent that have consumed toxins are very weak. Oftentimes, they twitch as they’re dying, and dogs and cats are interested in investigating – even playing with them – and pets sometimes end up consuming those animals that are dying or have died from warfarin toxicosis. Those toxins are passed up the food chain, so secondary toxicosis can occur even if you don’t have bait in or around your home.

Primary toxicosis is unfortunately the number one way that dogs die. It means that the dog eats the bait itself. Instead of the mice or rats consuming the bait, the dog or cat consumes the bait. More often it’s dogs. The reason that this particular form of toxicosis is more fatal is that dogs tend to ingest a higher concentrated dose. They eat a larger amount of the bait. The prognosis for dogs and cats that have consumed warfarin is really based on how much they ingested, how long ago they consumed it, and what treatment was instituted afterward.

**Inducing Vomiting and Seeking Veterinary Care**

If you believe that there could be a chance of your dog or cat having warfarin toxicosis, I recommend that you seek veterinary care immediately. The sooner that your veterinarian can identify if there’s poisoning, the better the chances are of your dog or cat being saved.

Veterinarians perform a blood test. It’s an anticoagulant test called a clotting profile, which will potentially tell how much bait has been ingested and, most importantly, what dose of vitamin K – the treatment for warfarin toxicosis – needs to be administered.

If you know that your dog has recently ingested bait and you’re absolutely sure that ingestion has occurred, you can induce vomiting and call your veterinarian. He’ll walk you through how to induce vomiting. If it’s been a day or two, inducing vomiting doesn’t do anything. We recommend that if you have suspicions – if you see your kitty consuming a dead mouse and are concerned about warfarin poisoning in that mouse – you can ask your veterinarian to do a
simple blood test to identify if your cat’s blood is able to clot appropriately or if there’s potential toxicosis.

Hospitalization sometimes needs to occur if the clotting profile is terrible -- if the results of the blood test are terrible -- or indeed if your dog or cat is already having symptoms. Your veterinarian may need to hospitalize your pet and/or perform a blood transfusion to save his or her life.

Preventing Toxicosis

Obviously, the two best ways to avoid ever having to experience this first-hand would be number one, don’t bait. If you have a mouse or rat problem at home and you’re interested in controlling those animals getting into your home, I recommend a live trap called a Havahart trap. It’s a humane trap that you can use to bait. You can catch mice or rats and remove them from your home without using toxins or poisons in the environment.

The second way that you can avoid secondary toxicosis is that when you let your dogs or cats outside your house, supervise them closely to make sure that they’re not consuming mice or rats that have wandered on to your property and could have warfarin in their bloodstreams.