

October 2005



Paws for Pets

A Tangled Web: Halloween Product Contributes to a Real-Life Horror

By Brian Sodergren

Patricia Wallace's house on Long Island, New York looks like many others this time of the year: outfitted with the spooky Halloween decorations that seem as harmless and common as cobwebs in the basement.

Only now, Wallace associates these commercially sold frights with a true horror: the death of her cat, Tabitha.

One October day in 2003, Wallace's one-and-a-half year old cat ate some fake sinewy cobwebs that were stretched across the homeowner's bay window. Like something out of a bad horror flick, the bogus spider web ensnared a very real victim: Tabitha's intestines became clogged after consuming the synthetic product.

Wallace was working one of her two jobs when Tabitha decided to take a bite out of the cobweb, but once she got home, she immediately noticed something was wrong with her kitty. What Wallace didn't immediately know, however, was the cause.

"Tabitha used to follow me like a puppy dog," Wallace said. But on this day, Wallace noticed the black-and-white polydactyl feline was acting "very funky."

"Her whole demeanor changed," she explained. Since the only alert listed on the packaging was a general asphyxiation and choking warning for the plastic spider that came with fake cobweb, Wallace never imagined the product could put her kitty's life in jeopardy. About four days passed before Wallace realized that her cat's problems weren't going to pass on their own, and that she needed to take Tabitha to a veterinarian.

"She was very lethargic, throwing up, not eating, and not going to the bathroom," Wallace said. "(But) I figured it

could have been a hairball or something her system could have gotten rid of naturally."



The veterinarian had to remove nearly ten inches of Tabitha's intestines to try and save her life. Unfortunately, the operation wasn't enough. Shortly after the surgery, while recovering amid the comforts of home, Tabitha died in Wallace's arms.

"I want people to know about the danger of this product," said Wallace, who plans eventually to adopt another cat. "It killed my cat. It could have just as easily been a child."

Wallace suspects there are many pet owners who have faced a similar problem, although she said her veterinarian had never before seen a case of a cat eating a fake spider web. Veterinarians typically see cats who eat string, yarn, and similar objects, which can cause the same intestinal damage. This is why The HSUS strongly urges cat owners to keep such objects, and even dental floss, away from their four-footed friends.

Halloween No Treat for Pets

Tabitha's ordeal underscores just one of the many dangers pet owners face around Halloween. Or face year-round, depending on household habits. Chief among the dangers is chocolate, the sweet treat that some humans swear is

Front Story continued...

better than love. To canines, though, the so-called elixir of the gods can be a one-way ticket to heaven's gate.

According to the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), "Even small amounts of theobromine, an ingredient in chocolate, can cause vomiting and restlessness in pets. Larger doses can be fatal."

How much can kill? The AAHA says four to ten ounces of milk chocolate, or one-half to an ounce of baking chocolate, can kill a small dog like a toy poodle. For medium-sized dogs, such as a cocker spaniel, one to one-and-a-half pounds of milk chocolate, or two to three ounces of baking chocolate, can be fatal. And for large breeds, two to four-and-a-half pounds of milk chocolate, or four to eight ounces of baking chocolate, can kill.

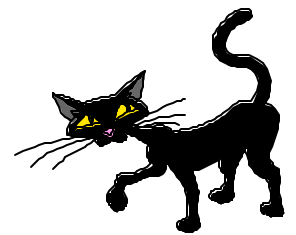
While cats are seldom poisoned by chocolate, felines do face other life-and-death issues around Halloween: pranksters who abuse or even kill black cats in some ritualistic way. Even cats of other colors may not be safe if left outdoors on October 31, when the line between tricks and animal cruelty gets horribly blurred in some people's minds.

The bottom line: While it's good to open the door for trick-or-treaters, it's best to keep your pet behind a closed one on Halloween. The practice will not only keep the critters out of harm's way, but will also lower their stress levels.

"Dogs and cats rely on daily routine," said Nancy Peterson, companion animal issues specialist for The HSUS. "When that routine is disrupted by lots of noise and commotion, like trick-or-treaters ringing the doorbell and people in strange costumes, pets can become frightened or agitated. It's best to keep pets at a safe distance from the festivities."

"Keep your pet safe in an enclosed area with a toy and soothing music," adds Peterson. "Resist the urge to include your pet in your Halloween activities, and everyone can enjoy the holiday."

Brian Sodergren is a former Issues Specialist in The HSUS's Companion Animal Outreach section.



7 Essential Halloween Pet Tips

1. Keep pets safely inside, away from trick-or-treaters and other Halloween activities.
2. Cats, especially black ones, may be the target of pranksters. Keep cats safely indoors. Go to www.safecats.org for more information.
3. Be sure all pets are wearing collars with ID tags, as frequently opened doors provide a perfect opportunity for escape.
4. Keep candy out of your pet's reach. Candy can be harmful to pets and chocolate is toxic to cats, dogs, and ferrets.
5. Keep pets away from decorations. Candle flames can quickly singe, burn or set fire to a pet's fur. Pets can become tangled in hanging decorations like streamers and can choke on some decorations if they chew on them.
6. Resist the urge to put your furry friend in costume. Most pets dislike the confinement of costumes and masks, and flowing capes can cause injuries if pets get caught on something.
7. Don't bring the family dog along for trick-or-treating. Dogs may become difficult to handle during the noise and confusion of the festivities. A lost dog or dog bite will quickly end your Halloween fun.