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AUTUMN PAWS



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You are walking your Great Dane, Rex, down the street following all of the responsible owner rules – Rex is securely attached to his leash and is walking, assumedly at ease, by your side. Then along comes another dog, let's call him "Mr Right". Your eyes meet. You smile. He smiles. Rex smiles. Wedding bells play in the distance. Ok, maybe not that last bit.... Thirty seconds later, Mr Right, spurting blood from a number of newly crafted bodily orifices, unceremoniously legs it in the opposite direction. All thanks to one (not so) Great Dane.

But is Rex really to blame?

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What's on the menu for bunny?

The popularity of rabbits as pets is on the rise in Australia – common breeds include the Dwarf Lop, Mini Lop, Rex, Dutch and Satin. Unfortunately, a poor or inappropriate diet is one of the most common causes of health problems in rabbits. We talk to North Geelong Vet Clinic's Head Nurse, Ella, to **find out what you should be feeding your rabbit.**

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Chocolate: the good, the bad and the ugly

Easter is nearly upon us and, so too, a truckload of chocolate fashioned into eggs, rabbits, bilbies, birds, various other shapes and the never-fail family block. This brings us to a common chocolate-sharing dilemma – what to do when you get that longing look from doggy eyes? Give us some, we hear them whimper. Give us more, we hear them bark.



But why isn't it cool to share your chocolate stash?

THE GOOD: Chocolate is fine – no, let's make that great – for *human* consumption.

THE BAD: Chocolate is toxic to many animal species. Dr Janine Heywood, a veterinarian at North Geelong Vet Clinic, explains that the problem lies with two components of chocolate – theobromine and caffeine. 'These substances belong to the methylxanthines class of drugs and, interestingly, they're part of the reason why humans feel good after eating chocolate. Both have stimulant and diuretic properties, while theobromine also affects the respiratory and digestive systems.'

Theobromine and caffeine levels vary depending on the type of chocolate consumed. Dr Janine lists dry cocoa powder and dark chocolate, particularly unsweetened varieties, as the worst offenders followed by milk chocolate. 'One brand may even contain vastly different amounts of theobromine and caffeine compared to another brand of the same type of chocolate. In comparison, white chocolate contains very little or even none of the toxic ingredients.' She adds: 'On top of this, some animals are more susceptible than others to the effects of these compounds.'

Whereas humans are good at metabolising and excreting caffeine and theobromine, animals are not – and therein lies the problem. 'Because these compounds persist longer in animals, their effects are much more pronounced,' says Dr Janine. 'Symptoms generally occur within 6 to 12 hours but can be seen as early as 2 to 4 hours post-ingestion. Initial clinical signs include vomiting, diarrhoea, restlessness, excitability, increased drinking and urination, muscle tremors and increased respiratory rate.'

THE UGLY: Worst case scenario, says Dr Janine, is the death of a pet due to chocolate poisoning. 'There's no antidote so it can, and does, happen. For a 10 kilogram dog, a dose as small as 65 grams of unsweetened dark chocolate could potentially be lethal. It's not much at all when you think about it. Once there are more advanced signs such as heart problems, seizures, hyperthermia and respiratory failure, that's when it really becomes touch-and-go.'

'Death is a real possibility for animals who have ingested sufficient quantities of the toxic compounds and who haven't been brought in early enough for treatment,' she continues, while noting that pets suffering other illnesses may also have a grim prognosis. 'The earlier we see them the better – we'll try to make the animal vomit the chocolate up if it's within a couple of hours. If that's successful and the pet is stable, they normally go home for monitoring. Other cases may require hospitalisation and intensive supportive therapy such as intravenous fluids and anti-seizure medication. I've seen cases where hospitalisation lasted several days.' Dr Janine says that chocolate poisoning is most commonly encountered in dogs because of their penchant for begging and indiscriminate eating but other pets are susceptible as well: 'Cats, birds, rodents and reptiles can all fall victim to the toxic effects of theobromine and caffeine. Therefore, it's wise to avoid feeding chocolate to any pet.' On a brighter note, that means more for you!

OPENING HOURS:

Monday – Friday 8am – 7pm
Saturday 8am – 1pm

North Geelong **Veterinary Clinic**

Why learning to speak dog should top your list

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An observant owner would have known that Rex wasn't happy with the situation unfolding, according to Dr Jenny Hallows, Behaviour Veterinarian at North Geelong Veterinary Clinic. 'A stranger, no matter his intent, was invading Rex's personal space and that of his owner. Some dogs are ok with that, he obviously wasn't. It's highly likely that Rex's 'smile' was really him baring his teeth, a sign of fear or anxiety-based aggression,' continues Dr Jenny. 'He was clearly saying 'go away' to Mr Right but his distracted owner failed to notice – hence, the ensuing attack.' Now many of us think attacks 'come out of nowhere' or are due to an unpredictable animal. In reality, Dr Jenny explains, the majority of dogs give clear warnings in the lead up to the attack, warnings that usually go unnoticed or are dismissed by owners in denial.

'A dog that's growling is a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised at how often dogs attack without growling first,' continues Dr Jenny. There is good news though. Apparently one can master the art of speaking fluent dog in no time at all by understanding that our pooch pals also communicate their moods through various facial expressions and body positions. 'Dogs aren't really that different to us. They can be relaxed, playful, stressed, frightened, submissive, anxious, sad or excited. Fear and anxiety-based aggression are obviously the biggest concerns but issues like obsessive behaviours also need to be addressed.'

So always pay attention to the whole dog – look at the position of its ears, eyes, lips, mouth, body and tail. Dr Jenny emphasises that this holds true even for dogs that you know well. 'It's just not realistic to expect dogs to be friendly and happy all the time. People aren't, so why should dogs be any different?

Dr Jenny uses the following mental checklist with all dogs:

- **Ears: Are they back or forward?**
- **Eyes: Are they staring directly at you or looking away?**
- **Teeth: Are they visible?**
- **Lips: Are they curled?**
- **Nose: Is it wrinkled?**
- **Body: Is it stiff and leaning forward or lowered down?**
- **Hackles: Are they raised?**
- **Tail: Is it stiff and held up? Is it down between the legs?**



Answering yes to any of these questions should alert you to the possibility of a dog with fear or anxiety-based aggression. She advises slowly backing away from the animal and 'definitely don't look straight into its eyes because that might be seen as a challenge.' Most of all, says Dr Jenny, don't greet dogs by giving them your hand to sniff. 'I see this all the time because people have been told that's what you do with dogs. But, really, would you like to be surprised by someone rushing up and sticking their hand in your face? It's actually quite intimidating for the dog and can result in a bite. A better option is to let the dog make first contact when it feels comfortable. And always, always ask the owner for permission beforehand.'

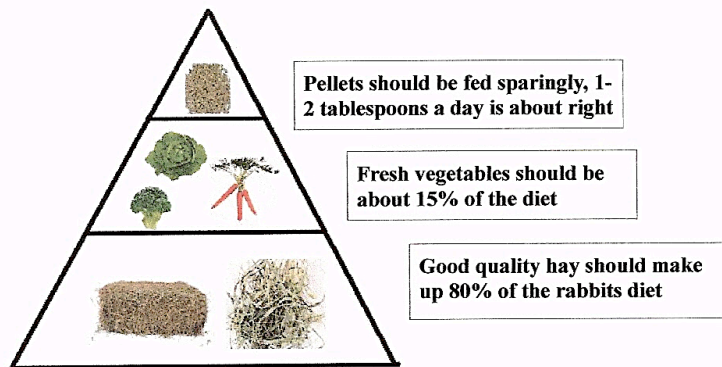
March is 'Polite Pets' month – a good time to see how well you know your pet and to address any behavioural concerns, such as aggression, separation anxiety, excessive barking, thunder phobias and inappropriate toileting. 'Your veterinarian can assess your pet to rule out any underlying causes, and then discuss the suitability of behaviour modification and pheromones like DAP® and Feliway®. Severe cases may warrant referral to a behavioural specialist,' Dr Jenny explains.

'We also recommend "Paw-fect Puppies" preschool for age-appropriate socialisation and training of new pups. Older pups aged between 4 and 7 months can attend the Terrific Toddlers class. Our philosophy is simple – prevention is always better than cure.' If you would like further information regarding your pet's behaviour or to book in to our training classes, contact the clinic on 03 5278 5400. You'll also find plenty of great insights and tips from veterinarian and animal behaviourist, Dr Sophia Yin, at www.drsophiayin.com.

What's on the menu for bunny?

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There's no doubt that rabbits make great pets, says Ella. 'Many of our clients own rabbits and are amazed by their level of interaction and intelligence. They can be quite inquisitive and friendly just like dogs and cats. Kids love them, especially the ones that are frightened of bigger animals, so they can make an ideal first pet.' Feeding rabbits is not difficult but there are important differences between a diet fit for bunny and those for dogs or cats, explains Ella. 'Rabbits are herbivores and have a very interesting digestive system. They actually pass two different types of faeces, one of which – a soft, black dropping – is immediately eaten. While that sounds pretty unpleasant to you and me, being able to digest their food twice actually allows rabbits to extract sufficient nutrition from a highly fibrous diet. It's quite clever really. Rabbits also pass hard faecal pellets, which are not consumed.'



Because of their special digestive system, it's extremely important to feed rabbits lots of fibre and good quality grass or oaten hay should make up about eighty to ninety per cent of their total intake. Owners should look for hay sold in bales, not plastic bags, says Ella. 'It's not only fresher but cheaper as well. Be careful not to feed lucerne or clover hay though – these are tastier grasses but can cause bladder stones due to their high calcium content.' And beware straw hay, which has no nutritional value, she adds.

Plenty of fresh leafy green vegetables are also a menu-must for bunny. Ella lists Asian greens, celery, coriander, parsley, mint, dandelion leaves, broccoli, cabbage leaves, cauliflower leaves and untreated grass as suitable options. 'Aim to give one and a half cups per kg of bodyweight daily. Therefore, a three kilo rabbit should get roughly four and a half cups of vegetables each day. Sneaky treats can be the downfall of many a human, and rabbits are not immune either so limit them to special occasions. Examples of rabbit treats are apples, bananas, watermelon, strawberries, tomatoes, capsicum and grapes.'

Ella also advises multi-person households should designate one person who is responsible for feeding pet rabbits, especially when it comes to treats to prevent over feeding. She also recommends feeding pellets sparingly as these cause dental, gut and weight problems. 'Many people don't realise that pellets are used to fatten up farmed rabbits – obviously, not what we want for our bunnies.' Foods that rabbits should never be fed include corn, potato, bread, peas, oats, grains, beans, rhubarb, iceberg lettuce, chocolate, human sweets and cereals.

Anyone seeking further advice about the dos and don'ts of bunny feeding should contact the clinic. 'We're always happy to have a chat regarding the best food for your rabbit. Vaccinations and general check-ups annually are another great opportunity for owners to ask questions.'

Meet the Vet: Dr Janine Heywood

Where did you grow up? Grovedale, Geelong. I went to Oberon High School.
 When did you become a Vet? I graduated from Melbourne University in 2007
 What is your favorite part of being a Vet? Meeting the lovely owners and their adorable pets. I get great joy in helping to keep them healthy and happy.
 Pets at home? Crazy Crash the Terrier and Mellow Miss Mimi the Cat
 Your favorite food? Ice cream – especially boysenberry!
 Your favorite holiday destination? Amsterdam – I went visited there last year.
 Hobbies? Dancing, flute, piano, gardening and cooking.

