



Pawsome! -- Bitter law protects animals

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It's been more than a year since Dr. Dan Lendy, a veterinarian at Chessie Lane Animal Hospital in Ottawa, has seen a local case of animal antifreeze poisoning.

"But we've definitely seen cases," he said.

And with a new state law aimed to protect dogs, cats, wildlife and children from being poisoned by accidentally drinking antifreeze and engine coolant, the number of cases Lendy sees could decrease even more.

Both products possess a sweet taste and can pose a hazard when spilled or left in open containers.

Now a new state law requires the addition of a bitter flavor to those fluids. Illinois is the 14th state to require a bittering agent in antifreeze and coolant.

House Bill 4722, sponsored by state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-Chicago, and state Sen. Linda Holmes, D-Aurora, received unanimous support in the state Legislature. Gov. Pat Quinn signed the bill into law July 22. It takes effect July 1, 2011.

Quinn, himself a pet owner, said the law will "help pet owners fulfill our responsibility to keep our pets safe from harm and will prevent avoidable tragedies."

The Humane Society of the United States estimates 90,000 animals are poisoned every year after ingesting ethylene glycol, the toxic substance used in automotive antifreeze and coolant.

Unfortunately, very small amounts can be lethal to pets. As little as one teaspoon of antifreeze can be deadly to a cat; while less than four teaspoons can be dangerous to a 10-pound dog, according to a joint warning from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the National Animal Poison Control Center.

Lendy said antifreeze poisoning is second only to poisoning from mouse and rat poison.

"If the owners know right away their pet got into antifreeze there's a treatment for it. But if they don't know, then once they get sick from it they're in pretty bad shape in a few days. It causes stones to form in the kidneys so the urine won't pass through and it destroys the kidneys."

Lendy said the size of the pet, the amount of antifreeze ingested and the timeframe dictate the pet's treatment and chance of survival.

"Once I saw (a pet) that got a tremendous amount, went into seizures and we couldn't save it.

"However, most of the time with a lower dose, they don't have seizures or any outward signs until the kidneys start failing anywhere from probably two to seven days later."

Dr. Donald Brainard, a veterinarian with the Novak-Brainard Veterinary Clinics in Ottawa and Streater, said there they treat a few cases of antifreeze poisoning each year.

"We feel most of those are accidental cases of animals that typically come in contact with antifreeze after it has leaked from a vehicle radiator," he told The Times.

"Antifreeze can be fairly sweet and animals will lap it up without realizing they are getting something that can be very, very lethal to their kidneys.

"Especially in hot weather it will overflow onto the driveway and the animals just sniffing around will get a lap or two of it and end up going into kidney failure."

It's not just pets that are victims, Brainard said.

"Animals like coyotes are probably poisoned this way more than your average household dog and cat are. But it is something that pet owners need to watch for."

The new law is a good one, Brainard said.

"I think it's common sense."

Antifreeze Poisoning Prevention Tips

- Clean up antifreeze spills immediately.
- Check your car regularly for radiator leaks.
- Always store antifreeze containers in areas that are inaccessible to your pets.
- Never allow your pets to have access to the area when you are draining antifreeze from your car.
- Propylene glycol is a less toxic form of antifreeze and should be used instead of ethylene glycol.
- If you suspect your pet has ingested antifreeze, contact your veterinarian immediately.

Source: American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the National Animal Poison Control Center