

Man Suspects Sugarless Gum Poisoned His Ferrets

An Ohio man said xylitol-sweetened gum killed one of his ferrets and sickened another.

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Russell James Jr. of Lorain County, Ohio, claims that sugarless gum containing the sweetener xylitol caused one of his ferrets to die and another to become seriously ill after eating the gum. When one ferret passed blood and became lethargic, James said he and his family rushed it to the veterinarian, where it died a few hours later.

James said that the next morning he found evidence of the chewed gum and asked his veterinarian if it could be the cause of the ferret's death. The vet immediately guessed the brand, a popular sugarless gum, and said that dogs and cats were getting ill from it, James said. Fearing for the health of his other ferret, James said he took it to the vet, where it was found to be in the early stages of dehydration. The ferret was kept overnight for treatment and – \$650 later – it recovered, according to James.

In addition, James said the family's 3-year-old dog, which was previously healthy, recently suffered a seizure one night. James blames the gum. He also suspects that the gum might have caused the death of another of his ferrets a year ago. No autopsies were done on the deceased ferret to confirm the cause of death. James said he was too upset at the time to consider that.

After these experiences, the family changed its xylitol-sweetened gum buying habits. "It don't come in the house," James said.

Xylitol-related pet poisonings are a concern. "From January 1, 2006 to the present [May 2008], the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center has managed 727 cases involving xylitol-containing products," said a spokesperson for the ASPCA's Animal Poison Control Center. The spokesperson stated that this is an overall number, which means that it includes any report of possible xylitol-related poisoning, whether or not it was confirmed. "At present, only dogs appear to be affected by xylitol ingestion," said the spokesperson. "This doesn't mean there aren't others, but we have not been able to confirm any cases in other species."

The ASPCA issued a warning to pet owners in August 2006 that xylitol could cause serious problems for dogs. At that time, a spokesperson for the Animal Poison Control Center said that there were 70 cases of poisoning involving xylitol in 2004, 170 cases in 2005 and 114 cases by August of 2006.

Eric Dunayer, veterinarian and toxicologist for the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center, stated in the press release that previously it was believed that ingesting large concentrations of xylitol could cause problems – like a sudden drop in blood sugar or liver failure – but they were now seeing problems from ingesting products with lesser amounts. With smaller concentrations, the onset of signs of illness might be as long as 12 hours. "Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that even if your pet does not develop signs right away, it does not mean that problems won't develop later on," Dunayer said.

Vomiting is usually the initial sign after xylitol ingestion, Dunayer said. Hypoglycemia may develop within 30 to 60 minutes or be delayed for up to 12 hours. "The clinical signs may progress rapidly from lethargy to ataxia, collapse and seizure," he said.

The ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center strongly urges pet owners to be especially diligent in keeping candy, gum or other foods containing xylitol out of the reach of pets. If you suspect your pet is suffering from poisoning, contact your veterinarian or call the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center for a consultation at (888) 426-4435 (a fee is charged).