

# Walker Veterinary Hospital

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## Common Sugar Substitute Can Be Life-Threatening for Pets

Xylitol is a sweetener found in many human "sugar free" products, such as gum, candies, and other sweets. Xylitol is a sugar alcohol – an artificial sweetener created from birch, raspberries, plums and corn. In humans, high doses may have a mild laxative effect, but in dogs, ingestion could be fatal.

It has been known for quite some time that there is a link between xylitol ingestion and hypoglycemia (low blood sugar) in dogs. The ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center has noted a connection between xylitol consumption and acute toxicity in dogs due to the prevalence of this sweetener in human foods. Xylitol is also suspected of causing toxicity in ferrets.

Signs of toxicity can be seen as quickly as 30 minutes after ingestion. While it was previously thought that only large concentrations of xylitol could cause problems in dogs, lesser amounts of the sweetener may also be harmful. With smaller concentrations of xylitol, the onset on clinical signs could be delayed as much as 12 hours after ingestion.

Xylitol causes a rapid release of the hormone insulin, causing a sudden decrease in blood glucose. This in turn may cause the following symptoms.

- Vomiting
- Weakness
- Ataxia (uncoordinated movements)
- Depression
- Hypokalemia (decreased potassium)
- Liver dysfunction and/or failure
- Seizures
- Coma

These signs can develop quite rapidly, at times less than three minutes after ingestion of the product. Therefore, it is crucial that pet owners seek veterinary treatment immediately. Veterinary treatment involves close monitoring and treating of the resultant low blood glucose and possible low potassium levels. For more information on xylitol and other products poisonous to pets, visit the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at [www.aspca.org](http://www.aspca.org) or by visiting our website for future articles.