

## The Dangers of Xylitol: Preventing Another Tragedy

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Beetle Kelly, 10 months old, was, according to his owner Elizabeth, “the most magical puppy imaginable.” And now he is only a memory, an achingly sad place in his family’s heart.

It all happened in a moment. “We’d been out walking and had just returned, when I turned around and saw him with a pack of gum. I took a half-piece out of his mouth but didn’t know how much he’d actually swallowed. Beetle looked guilty, and something rang in my brain that what he’d eaten, sugarless gum, was toxic.”



Elizabeth immediately called the vet, packed up her 4-year-old son and arrived at the clinic within 25 minutes. But somehow it took another whole hour somehow for the emetic to work. That time-lapse proved to be the final coda in the young Norwich’s life. A few hours later, Beetle succumbed to xylitol poisoning.

Xylitol is a common sugar substitute (also known as sugar alcohol) used in a wide variety of items these days. It seems to be everywhere: in sugarless gum, toothpaste, pharmaceuticals, vitamins, candy, baked goods, mints, and even puddings. While harmless to humans it can be lethal to dogs.

Once ingested, there is a window of just 15 to 30 minutes before it reaches the blood stream. As little as one-and-a-half sticks of a sugarless gum can be fatal to a small dog like a Norwich Terrier.

According to Eric K. Dunayer VMD, Senior Toxicologist at the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center, the toxin causes a rapid release of insulin, which in turn causes a dangerous drop in blood sugar. The resulting hypoglycemia causes weakness, lethargy, loss of coordination, collapse, and seizures. There is a strong link with xylitol and liver failure as well.

“Cases are going up each year,” says Dunayer. “In 2002, the Poison Control Center received two calls; in 2009, there were 2,600 calls. And this no doubt represents a fraction of the incidents.”

If you strongly suspect or know your dog has ingested xylitol, time is of the essence. Immediately, call your vet or call the ASPCA Poison Control Center (888-426-4435). They may advise you to induce vomiting in the dog. Regardless, the dog’s blood-glucose levels must be monitored and stabilized. Dunayer adds, “Most who die were not treated right away.”

What can you do to prevent this? Read labels. Keep xylitol out of reach; better yet, out of your house, purse, car, and so on. Help get the word out. Many vets and their staffs are not aware of this burgeoning threat. Save this column and download information from the web and send the information to your puppy owners, breed clubs, training centers, and other places dog owners congregate.

Thanks to Elizabeth Kelly for her kind permission to relate this story and to use Beetle’s photo.

If little Beetle’s death can be used to prevent another such terrible loss, he will not have died in vain.

— Leandra Little · Weehawken NJ · llittle9@earthlink.net

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