FOOD & PLANTS

Is a Poinsettia Toxic to Cats? Less Than You've Heard

Mildly. Poinsettia sap irritates a cat's mouth and stomach and can cause drooling and vomiting, but the ASPCA calls its toxicity generally overrated and the signs usually pass on their own. The holiday plant to fear is the lily.

By Catt County Cat Nippers • Reviewed November 1, 2026 • 6 min read • 7 cited sources

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The short answer

Mildly. The ASPCA lists the poinsettia (Euphorbia pulcherrima) as toxic to cats, dogs and horses: its sap irritates the mouth and stomach and sometimes causes vomiting. In the same entry it calls the plant generally overrated in toxicity.

The other veterinary sources agree. Pet Poison Helpline calls poinsettias only mildly toxic to cats and dogs and says the signs are generally self-limiting, and Merck's veterinary manual says the milky sap causes drooling and vomiting, but not death.

So keep it out of reach and expect, at worst, an upset stomach. The holiday plant that is a true emergency is the lily: every part of a true lily, even the pollen and the vase water, can cause kidney failure in a cat (FDA). See **are lilies toxic to cats**.

Why the poinsettia has a bad name

The poinsettia's reputation is older than the evidence. A 2012 review in the Western Journal of Emergency Medicine traces it to a single death of a 2-year-old in Hawaii in 1919, a case that was never confirmed. One study could not even find a median lethal dose in rats, and the poison-center records the review cites show no deaths.

Those records are about people, not cats, so they settle nothing on their own. The veterinary sources say the same for pets, though: Pet Poison Helpline calls poinsettia poisoning commonly hyped and greatly exaggerated, and the ASPCA, which does list the plant as toxic, still calls its toxicity overrated.

Mild is not the same as safe. The sap is a real irritant, so a cat that chews the leaves will usually regret it, and a call to your vet is still worth it if your cat ate a lot or keeps vomiting.

How the sap irritates

The poinsettia is a spurge, a Euphorbia, and like its relatives it bleeds a milky sap when a leaf or stem breaks. Pet Poison Helpline says the sap holds diterpenoid euphorbol esters, compounds that irritate whatever they touch: the mouth and stomach when chewed, the skin or eyes on contact.

Merck lists the poinsettia among the common houseplants that irritate the gut, and explains that the sap irritates mucous membranes. That is why drooling and lip-licking usually come first, often before any vomiting.

The red “petals” are leaves too, called bracts, and they hold the same sap as the green ones. A dropped bract on the floor is no safer than one on the plant.

Signs to watch for

POINSETTIA SIGNS, FROM COMMON TO RARE

Sign	How often	What to do
Drooling, lip-licking	Common	Call your vet or a poison line
Mild vomiting	Common	Call your vet or a poison line
Red, swollen or itchy skin where sap touched	Can happen	Call your vet or a poison line
Diarrhea	Rare	Call your vet or a poison line
Mild eye irritation, after sap got in an eye	Rare	Call your vet or a poison line
Vomiting that won’t stop, weakness, not eating	Not expected from a poinsettia	Go to a vet: it may be something else

From the ASPCA, Pet Poison Helpline and Merck. Pet Poison Helpline says the signs are generally self-limiting, and there is no antidote.

This quick sheet is the start of the guide. Still to read: If your cat chewed a poinsettia, What the vet may do, Keeping a poinsettia with a cat and 2 more sections, plus the Toxic & Safe Houseplants for Cats Chart. Read it all free when you join our pet health emails at cattcountycatnippers.org/articles/is-poinsettia-toxic-to-cats

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