

## ARE HAMSTERS IN THE ORDER RODENTIA? BY DR TERI

"We think he ate some of this houseplant."

"Uh huh," I murmured, only half listening as I stared down at my tiny patient, a chubby little golden hamster. Saliva was dribbling down his tiny chin and bubbling at the corners of his mouth. Every so often he emitted a tiny squeak. He certainly looked uncomfortable.

"Do you think he ate something toxic?" fretted my client. I was wondering how I was going to pry those miniscule jaws open and see what was in his mouth.

I glanced absently at the innocuous looking leaf the owner had offered, the possibly toxic plant. I tore a tiny piece off and popped it into my mouth, chewing thoughtfully as I eyed my little patient. Bland, no interesting taste, nothing toxic here. Then I swallowed the leafy morsel, and my eyes flew open wide!

Burning! Painful burning in my throat as it slid down. "It's definitely the plant!" I gasped. In one hand, I had grabbed the phone dialing poison control while my throat worked convulsively. My other hand groped into the fridge for a carton of milk.

Poison control came on the line as I started to gulp down long drafts of milk straight from the carton. "Say theoretically," glug-glug "someone were to swallow some plant," glug-glug "with some oxalic crystals in it, you know, like raw rhubarb? Would there be anything to do besides soothe your throat with something like," chug-chug "milk?"

I could hear Dr. Jones' amused response as she asked, "Dr. Teri, what did you eat this time?"

Some houseplants contain oxalic acid crystals. These crystals are uncomfortable and cause gastrointestinal upset when eaten raw. In my, and probably my little patient's case, they were not detectable in the tough epithelium of the mouth. But as they slid down to the thinner more sensitive throat lining, they were like swallowing little shards of glass.

This story has a happy ending. Both myself and my little golden friend survived, with the help of soothing broths and lots of ice cream. I think we both were a lot more careful about what we ate after that!