

Pot for Pets: Medical Uses of Marijuana in Companion Animals

Dr. Robert Silver, a holistic veterinarian, herbalist, and authority on medicinal marijuana, discusses the challenges of giving pot to sick pets — and the exciting alternative that is both legal and potentially safer and more effective.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Anecdotal reports by pet owners and veterinarians indicate that marijuana can be used to effectively treat many of the same conditions in pets that it treats in humans. However, in dogs, too much of the tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) contained in the drug causes a condition called static ataxia
- To further complicate matters, the THC in marijuana, including medical marijuana, is a DEA Schedule I Controlled Substance, which veterinarians cannot legally prescribe
- Dr. Rob Silver, a holistic veterinarian, herbalist, and authority on medicinal cannabis, believes industrial hemp, which contains almost no THC and higher amounts of medicinal components than marijuana, could be a potential solution for vets and pet guardians interested in providing the drug to sick animals
- Industrial hemp can be legally imported and sold state to state through the mail. In time, it may also become legal to grow the plant in the U.S. on a broader scale
- Scientific studies on medical marijuana and industrial hemp for animals are hard to find. Dr. Silver hopes to conduct future research on the potential benefits of both plants in treating sick pets

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Dr. Rob Silver has been a veterinarian since 1982, and a holistic vet since 1987. He sold his practice in Boulder, Colorado, and is now working full-time educating other veterinarians on the advantages of holistic medicine.

Back in 1982, Dr. Silver was very excited to start using all the conventional medicine tools he'd acquired as a veterinary student, and initially he really enjoyed it. As he explains it, "I'm very scientifically based and I really believe that practicing in conventional medicine is a very important foundation for any kind of medicine you want to practice."

But after he'd been practicing awhile, he began to grow frustrated with the fact that many of his patients had chronic diseases and a variety of difficult-to-treat problems that didn't respond to the treatments and therapies he had learned in school. His frustration drove him to look for other ways to help his patients.

The Holistic Journey Begins — First Stop: Animal Nutrition

The first stop on Dr. Silver's holistic veterinary medicine journey was pet nutrition. Some of his clients were asking for his help in creating homemade diets for their pets. His initial thought was that according to his vet school training, pets were supposed to eat commercial food and nothing else. But after a bit of research, he found some credible

books on the subject of homemade pet food, and began offering suggestions to his clients. And lo and behold, many of the pets belonging to those clients began to get better — he just wasn't sure why. But it made him wonder what other things he'd been taught that might be missing the mark.

Dr. Silver started looking at other alternative healing modalities — things he hadn't been taught in veterinary school. He began applying the modalities that were most accessible to him. At the time, his practice was very busy and he couldn't afford the time required to take courses in holistic practices. In addition, some of the registration fees for the courses were beyond his means at the time. So he went to the library to study, and he also sought out local holistic practitioners to learn from.

The concept of homemade pet nutrition really resonated with Dr. Silver, in part because before becoming a veterinarian, he had been a professional cook. But he also enjoyed walking in the forest and studying plants. He had an affinity for the plant world, so he found himself drawn to herbal therapies as well.

Next Step: Creating New and Effective Herbal Products for Pets

At that time, Dr. Silver was living in Colorado Springs, and he aligned himself with a number of human medicine herbalists. He began to learn how to identify plants with medicinal properties, harvest them, and make his own herbal medicines. For example, he made an herbal medicine using catnip, and began giving it to some of his animal patients for whom traditional drugs and other treatments weren't working. And their conditions improved.

Dr. Silver's interest in and practice of holistic veterinary medicine continued to expand. Around 1996, he began formulating wonderful herbal products for use by other veterinarians. It happened almost accidentally. He was creating products for use in his own practice, and adding plants he'd read about, such as milk thistle and turmeric. Essentially he was developing combination herbal products for pets, reminiscent in many ways of his career as a professional cook creating new dishes and menu items.

The products he was creating were working for his patients, and he wanted to share what he was learning. He was already a member of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association (AHVMA), where he could be around like-minded vets who enjoyed learning from each other. He began writing and speaking publicly about his clinical successes with the herbal medicines he created. Soon he was contacted by a company called Rx Vitamins for Pets, who invited him to become their chief medical officer, formulate their products for them, and have Dr. Silver's name on the label.

He agreed, and they started with a number of effective clinical protocols he was already using. They began adding products, and today there are 32 available.

An Introduction to Medical Marijuana for Pets

Due to his passion for plants and herbal products, Dr. Silver is also an authority on the medicinal use of cannabis in pets. Many people are asking about this, especially people who have older pets with painful conditions. Either the person has already tried marijuana for a pet with some success, or they've read about it and are interested in learning more. It's a big subject, and there's a lot of misinformation and confusion around it, so Dr. Silver will provide some insight.

He explained that in Colorado where he lives, medicinal cannabis for humans has been available since 2000. Back then,

when he was still practicing, clients would come to him and say things like, "Doc, my dog's got hip dysplasia. I've got these cookies at home that really help my knee pain. What do you think? Would it be okay to give a cookie to my dog?" He told them he really didn't know whether it was a good idea or not for pets, at which point almost all of them admitted they were already giving it to their pet. And further, the pet was doing well.

Dr. Silver heard those kinds of comments from people with pets with a variety of conditions — cancer, epilepsy, pain. It caught his interest, but he soon learned that while it was legal for human physicians to prescribe medical marijuana, it's not legal for a vet to prescribe it. This is because the THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) in medicinal pot is a DEA Schedule I Controlled Substance, and veterinarians can't typically prescribe that class of drugs. In fact, they risk losing their license if they do.

Dr. Silver began talking to his clients about medicinal marijuana, making suggestions, but he did so using a lot of disclaimers to protect himself legally. He said things like, "I've heard about this but I really can't recommend it to you. If you want to try it, my suggestion would be to do it this way." He would see them after they'd tried the marijuana with their pet, and most of the time, there were positive results. Sometimes, there were no results. And once in a while, an owner eager to help a pet would give more in an initial dose than Dr. Silver recommended, and the dog would have a bad reaction.

Anecdotal Reports Point to the Success of Medicinal Cannabis Against Various Pet Health Conditions

After his introduction to using medicinal pot with dogs, Dr. Silver headed back to the library. "I'm kind of a library nerd," he says. "I do a ton of library research."

He went to the world literature section to learn if there'd ever been any studies on cannabis and pets. He found a study from the 1970s involving the use of intravenous THC in dogs, pigeons, monkeys, mice, and rats.

The authors of that study labeled the cannabis as radioactive, and sadly, the animals were sacrificed. The researchers autopsied the animals' brains to find out where the THC went. What they found was that of the species involved in the study, the dogs had higher concentrations of endocannabinoid receptors in their hindbrain, medulla, and a couple of other areas of the brain.

The scientists also discovered that the dogs, but not the other animals, had a very unique reaction when they got too much THC. They developed something called static ataxia in which they stood still and rocked back and forth, as if they couldn't move. They drooled, their eyes opened very wide, and they looked as if they were having a bad trip (a drug-induced hallucination).

When Dr. Silver read about the dogs' reaction to the THC, he realized he needed to educate people, because up to that point, everyone believed marijuana was absolutely harmless. People get edible marijuana, or "medibles" like chocolate brownies, for example, and leave them where their dog can eat them. The dog overdoses on marijuana, and of course the chocolate is also toxic. There've been a couple of deaths of pets, so Dr. Silver feels education is the best medicine. He's writing an e-book for people living in states where the drug is legal that will walk them through the whole medicinal marijuana process and provide explanations and answers to a lot of common questions. Of course, if you live in a state where it's not legal, you're not supposed to use it at all.

Dr. Silver also talked about the pain management benefits of the drug. He explained that based on anecdotal reports

from veterinarians, it appears that the same applications medical marijuana is used for in humans apply to dogs, and also cats.

But there's no direct research on pets, and Dr. Silver hopes to find funding to conduct studies to determine what conditions medical marijuana can treat in pets, what dosages to administer, etc. Based on lots of research in laboratory animals and test tubes to measure the effects of cannabis extracts on different medical conditions, the drug appears to have a wide range of applications.

Industrial Hemp: A Safer, More Effective Alternative to Pot for Pets?

There are a couple of companies currently marketing cannabis-like products for pets. However, they're illegal in all 50 states in the U.S., because as Dr. Silver mentioned earlier, it's the THC in marijuana that the DEA considers a Schedule I controlled substance, which makes it illegal for use in pets in any state.

In a medicinal state, it's legal for physicians to prescribe to human patients. But within the cannabis plant itself, there are phytocannabinoids and phytochemicals that have biological impact. There are 65 cannabinoids, of which THC is just one. There has been research done on most of the cannabinoids, and they have been found to have application in patients with epilepsy, pain, behavior disorders, neurodegenerative conditions, and perhaps even allergies.

There's also another type of cannabis called hemp. Hemp, or industrial hemp, has a very low amount of THC — so low that it's not psychotropic, meaning it doesn't deliver a high. Industrial hemp can be sold legally from state to state through the mail. A couple of companies are exploring getting extracts from industrial hemp, putting it into capsules, liquids, or other forms depending on the company's product line, and selling it to the public.

The problem is lack of research. There's no research to support that medical marijuana works with pets. The anecdotal reports from veterinarians and pet owners show that the drug does seem to be effective. Dr. Silver is hoping to generate some objective data that can support the use of industrial hemp, because it is safe and doesn't contain THC, so vets can recommend it and even dispense or prescribe it.

According to Dr. Silver, there are actually larger amounts of the other medicinal components in hemp. This seems to be the advantage of using industrial hemp — it's legal, dogs won't go into static ataxia from the THC, and it has higher levels of cannabinoids than regular marijuana.

It's also thought that in ancient times, it was the medicinal properties of hemp that were mentioned in the Bible and other texts. But since people are interested in getting high, hemp has been bred over the centuries to increase the level of THC. Modern day cannabis doesn't bear much resemblance to what grew on the planet before humans started finding uses for the plant.

Federal Government Is Easing Restrictions on Growing Industrial Hemp in the U.S.

Dr. Silver said that there is also research on the benefits of industrial hemp for human health conditions. In fact, there are companies that sell just the cannabidiol (CBD) extracts from hemp that can be ingested orally. They can even be put in e-cigarettes and smoked for a faster effect.

The CBD is also used in topical applications like salves and transdermals. Because cannabidiol is fat-soluble, it goes

into the skin very easily. It also crosses the blood-brain barrier easily as well, which allows it to affect the nervous system. According to Dr. Silver, CBD is very beneficial for the nervous system.

So the obvious question is, if industrial hemp is as beneficial as the prescribed product, why do we even worry about the prescribed product that causes a high, other than the benefit of getting high? Why isn't everyone just using industrial hemp? If it helps with the pain of arthritis, stops seizures, provides other positive medicinal effects, and if we can get it over the counter, why isn't everyone just taking the legal form of the drug?

Dr. Silver responded that there's a great deal of interest by large investors in this very scenario. What's happening in Colorado, for example, where marijuana is relatively legal, is that people are starting to grow industrial hemp. Since the 1930s, it has been illegal to grow it in the U.S., because it is hard to tell the difference between low-THC hemp and high-THC cannabis. The plants are imported from Canada, Europe, and China, and processed in the U.S.

The federal government wants to thwart all production of the illegal high-THC cannabis, so rather than learn the differences between the two, they decided to outlaw all hemp. This approach doesn't make sense, because according to Dr. Silver, although the plants do look similar, experts can usually tell the difference without testing for THC content.

But the government must test in order to verify that something is an illegal vs. a legal substance. They are just now beginning to once again allow the growth of industrial hemp in this country, and experts expect it will become a huge industry for farmers. Kentucky, for example, was once one of the largest growing states for industrial hemp. It's a relatively poor state, and if they can begin growing the plant again, it could really benefit the local economy.

Industrial Hemp Also Has Many Uses Not Related to Its Medicinal Properties

Given all the information Dr. Silver has shared, there are probably a lot of potential medicinal benefits of industrial hemp for both humans and animals that we don't know about because we aren't studying it. Dr. Silver agrees, and points out that there are other, entirely different uses for the plant as well.

For years, we used industrial hemp to make paper, fabric, rope, and other items. The seeds of the plant have a high protein content. They make a very good oil. There are many things we can do with industrial hemp aside from its use as a medicine. Dr. Silver is looking forward to seeing other states besides Colorado get involved in growing the plant.

Resources Currently Available for Cannabis for Pets

The use of medical marijuana for pets, whether the extracts that contain THC or the high CBD industrial hemp extracts, is so new that there are very few reliable websites or sources of information to guide the pet guardian in their search for something to help their pets.

Research is just getting started and unfortunately, the results are not yet available. There are only two companies as of this writing that offer hemp-based products for pets. Neither have any published research, nor do they list CBD or other cannabis phytocannabinoid quantities on their product labels. This makes it difficult for Dr. Silver to recommend them 100%, until they make that information available. A number of pet guardians have used these products and many have reported a positive response.

Dr. Silver has an eBook on the topic of medical marijuana for pets, and soon he will publish a print version of that book. He also has two websites, one in which he gives advice: Holistic Cancer Vet, and one in which his eBook on

Cannabis for Pets is available: Well Pet Dispensary.

Dr. Silver also sends out a digital newsletter that contains up-to-date information about cannabis for pets. You can sign up to receive it at his Holistic Cancer Vet website, or you can go directly to the link here. As more companies and informational websites become available, he will add those links to his websites.

The American Veterinary Medical Association has published a few articles about medical marijuana use for pets in their journal, two of which are [**here**](#) and [**here**](#). The articles were written for veterinarians, but they contain good information for pet guardians as well.
