

The Difference Between Marijuana and CBD Oil for Pets

It's the THC in cannabis that can poison your dog, so how can you know which products are okay to use for or around your pet? Just because certain cannabidiol (CBD) oils may be harmless for dogs and cats doesn't mean other products won't trigger a frightening reaction.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- As recreational use of marijuana is legalized in a growing number of states across the country, more and more dogs are at risk of being exposed and poisoned by the THC in these products
- A study confirms there is a link between a reduction in penalties for marijuana use and possession and accidental THC toxicosis in dogs
- While THC poisoning in dogs is rarely fatal, the clinical signs can cause short- and in some cases, long-term medical problems
- It's also important for pet parents to understand that high-quality CBD products for pets are typically sourced from hemp and contain less than 0.3% THC
- CBD oils made with full-spectrum extracts are thought to have superior therapeutic effects vs. cannabidiol-only oil

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As an ever-increasing number of states in the U.S. legalize marijuana for recreational use, more and more dogs are consuming products containing THC, according to a new study from the University of Guelph.¹ The study is the first of its kind and while it's based on U.S. data, Canada is experiencing similar problems.

“We found in the data that there was an association between a reduction in penalties for cannabis use and possession and dogs being poisoned with cannabinoids,” lead author and PhD candidate Mohammad Howard-Azzeh said in an Ontario Veterinary College (OVC) news release. “There is some evidence to suggest these poisoning events are increasing in the U.S.”²

Risk Factors for THC Toxicosis in Dogs

For the study, the researchers investigated the differences between cannabinoid and non-cannabinoid calls to the ASPCA's Animal Poison Control Center (APCC) from 2009 to 2014. They used the APCC's **AnTox** veterinary database, which stores clinical animal toxicology data from calls that come into the center.

Per the university's news release, “The researchers examined effects of varying state-level cannabis legislation, county-level socioeconomic factors and individual characteristics on dog cannabis poisoning reports.”

Study results showed a significant increase in reports of cannabis poisoning in dogs, especially in areas that have legalized marijuana. Accidental poisoning appears to be more common in areas with high income variability, in urban vs. rural areas, and among smaller, intact male dogs. The researchers suspect dogs’ risk of exposure to THC is linked to their socioeconomic environment.

“A growing number of research efforts are aimed at understanding the effects of less restrictive legislation on human consumption, health and abuse of cannabis products, but little is known about the effects of these factors on dogs,” study co-author David Pearl said in the OVC news release.

Howard-Azzeh notes that dogs are indiscriminate eaters who counter- and table-surf, and often snatch things off the floor or the ground to sample.

“Those eating habits appear to extend to cannabis products,” said Howard-Azzeh.

THC Poisoning Symptoms

Thankfully, THC poisoning in dogs is rarely fatal, but the clinical signs are significant and can be frightening for both the dog and the owner. They include:

- Disorientation
- Hyperexcitability
- Vomiting
- Hyperthermia
- Incontinence
- Vocalizations
- Irregular heart rate
- Seizures

Treatment by a veterinarian typically involves dealing with serious symptoms if they occur and providing supportive care.

An Upside — Owners Are Less Afraid to Report Poisonings

During the timeframe the study covered (2009 to 2014), many states hadn’t yet legalized marijuana. The researchers assumed that since 2014, as legalization spread to an increasing number of states, more people would have cannabis products at home — including edibles (cookies, cakes, candies) — and there would be more dogs inadvertently exposed.

“We have evidence that dogs are being exposed to cannabis more frequently throughout the study,” Howard-Azzeh said. “If there’s more cannabis in the environment, there’s more opportunity for dogs to eat it.

With less stigma surrounding cannabis use and no penalties for using it in states where it’s legal, people will have less fear about calling to report that their dog has been poisoned. That may explain in part the sharp increase in reported cases of poisoning in dogs in recent years.”

The U of G researchers believe their study will help educate veterinarians and public health professionals on what they can expect when marijuana is legalized in their areas, along with raising public awareness around the dangers of THC poisoning in pets.

“We hope this study spreads awareness of the potentially harmful effect cannabis may have on dogs and highlights the need for people to better safeguard these types of products from vulnerable populations,” said Howard-Azzeh.

“There is an education message in this in that just like children, pets can accidentally ingest these products,” Pearl said.

Owen Allerton, the owner of a cannabis dispensary in Kitchener, Canada, who has a dog, two cats, and three young children, told CBC News that marijuana users should always keep products containing THC out of reach of children and pets “up high, out of the way and in a sealed container.”³

There are strict federal rules in place in Canada to ensure products are safely packaged, but a motivated pet can chew through packaging. Allerton also noted that it’s very important that people steer clear of the illegal cannabis market, which may have been a factor in some of the data the U of G researchers analyzed.

“The illicit market product doesn't follow the packaging guidelines and the dosages are way higher,” he said, whereas Canadian federal guidelines limit the THC content in edibles.

CBD Oil Is Not ‘Marijuana for Pets’

Another serious concern is that many people incorrectly assume marijuana is safe for pets because cannabidiol (CBD) oil for dogs and cats has entered the pet supplement market in a big way.

Veterinarian Dr. Cathy Lund wrote a column for The Providence Journal taking the newspaper to task for publishing an interview with a local dog trainer that positioned marijuana as a safe and effective treatment for many medical problems in dogs and cats.

“Tell that to the young couple who rushed their 3-year-old Labradoodle to the veterinary emergency center after the dog collapsed from intractable seizures,” Lund writes.

“The dog survived, but may have liver damage, all from eating two marijuana cookies. The couple had no idea that marijuana is toxic to pets, and certainly wouldn’t have given their beloved dog those ‘treats’ if they had known the truth.”⁴

Lund continued:

“The hallucinogenic portion of marijuana, THC, is extremely toxic to dogs and cats. Our pets have many more receptors for these compounds in their brains, which is why the chemical can overwhelm their bodies.

They can die from ingesting too much of this drug. Cannabis in all forms is now becoming more and more acceptable and tolerated. It is natural to think that what is relaxing and helpful for us could also be something good for our beloved furry companions.”

CBD is a cannabinoid containing naturally occurring chemicals that act on the brain and body. The oil is produced from the cannabis plant and has no psychoactive properties like the THC found in marijuana and is also thought to have a wider range of medical benefits than THC.

CBD is extracted from cannabis plants and processed as an isolate or as a full-spectrum oil combined with other related cannabinoids. CBD oils made with full-spectrum extracts are thought to have superior therapeutic effects vs. cannabidiol-only oil.

There are two common strains of cannabis in use today — hemp and marijuana. Hemp is a cannabis plant that contains less than 0.3% of THC; marijuana has more than 0.3%. CBD products for pets are typically sourced from hemp.

Choosing a CBD Product for Your Pet

Out of the hundreds, perhaps thousands of brands of CBD on the market today, it’s important to try to choose a high-quality product for your pet. Experts recommend that you request a Certificate of Analysis (CoA) from the manufacturer that indicates potency, per-dosing unit, all ingredients, and the presence of mycotoxins, metals or pesticides to determine if a product is reasonably safe.

Many manufacturers don’t provide this information or offer only a limited version, but hopefully this will improve with time. There are substantial differences in effectiveness and potency not only between brands, but lots/batches, so if you didn’t think a brand you tried was effective, do more research and choose a different brand.

It’s important to keep in mind that anything that sounds too good to be true usually is, but hopefully, CBD products will one day have evidenced-based science behind them to prove their significant medicinal value.

Sources and References

¹ [Howard-Azzeh, M. et al. PLOS One, April 16, 2021](#)

² [University of Guelph, Ontario Veterinary College News Release, May 25, 2021](#)

³ [CBC News, May 26, 2021](#)

⁴ [The Providence Journal, May 10, 2021](#)
