

Marijuana: Toxic to Pets

There are few cities in the United States that have as much access to medical marijuana as Boulder does. With the increased availability of medical marijuana in our area, our pets are encountering more exposure to marijuana and its active chemical ingredient, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Unfortunately, THC is toxic to our pets, and exposure to marijuana can result in a very sick animal.

How Exposure Occurs

The vast majority of pet exposure occurs in dogs (95 percent). Our canine companions are notorious for eating, well, just about everything. Ingestion of marijuana is the most common way pets are exposed to the toxic THC. Marijuana edibles including butter, cookies and brownies are very tempting to pets. We all can imagine the Labrador Retriever sneaking onto the counter to eat those chocolate pot brownies. Some animals will ingest the raw plant leaves, seeds and even joints without hesitation. Finally, pets can also be exposed to second-hand marijuana smoke.

What Marijuana Does to Pets

THC is rapidly absorbed into the bloodstream. Signs of marijuana toxicity typically become apparent within minutes to a few hours. The most common symptoms of toxicity are neurologic abnormalities, including stumbling that potentially progresses to an inability to walk, depression, agitation, dribbling urine, twitching, seizures, pupil dilation and occasionally coma. Death is rare but can occur. About 30 percent of animals exposed to THC will develop gastrointestinal signs including drooling, vomiting and diarrhea. Because THC is lipid (fat) soluble, pets may exhibit mild to moderate symptoms for days as the chemical is slowly released from fat stores.

What to Do

Seek medical attention immediately from your veterinarian. Depending on the timing of ingestion, your veterinarian will try to "decontaminate." He or she will likely give a medication to induce vomiting and administer activated charcoal to help limit further absorption of THC. Then, your pet may need hospitalization and supportive care including an intravenous catheter, IV fluids, heat support, heart rate and blood pressure monitoring. If symptoms are very severe, your pet may need more aggressive care to manage seizures and possibly breathing support. The good news is that with mild to moderate exposure and prompt medical care, most pets will recover from this toxic exposure.

Most importantly, be honest and up front with your veterinarian that your pet was exposed to marijuana. Our interest and goal is to help your pet achieve a healthy condition as quickly as possible. If we know right away what toxin we are battling, we will be able to provide appropriate and efficient medical treatment. Veterinarians are not obligated to report marijuana exposure, so there is no need for legal concerns regarding your use of marijuana.

Keeping Pets Safe

Foremost, please keep your medical marijuana, weed, bud, ganja, pot, brownies and joints safely contained and out of your pets' reach (i.e. closed cupboards, drawers, high closet shelves, etc.). Do not leave remnants in an open trash container nor in a compost bin that your pet may sneak into for a snack. When smoking, ideally keep your pet in a separate room away from the smoke. If this is not possible, smoke in a well-ventilated area to minimize your pets' exposure to second-hand smoke.

THC Test

Yes. THC can be detected via blood or/and urine tests.

Do Pets Get High?

No. Marijuana exposure in pets causes neurologic toxicity, which is not the same as the "high" that people experience. The symptoms (staggering, agitation, stupor, etc.) that develop in pets do not appear enjoyable for them.

Medical Pot for Pets?

Currently, marijuana is considered a toxin to pets, and there are no recommended uses. Marijuana is a complex substance, and the effects of THC on individual animals are extremely variable. Some animals become highly agitated from marijuana, while others exhibit signs of depression. There have been studies that show THC may have anti-seizure effects, while other studies indicate THC may provoke seizures. Some feel marijuana may reduce nausea, but roughly 1/3 of animals exposed to marijuana will develop signs of nausea and vomiting.

Furthermore, dosing in animals is challenging. The THC content varies in marijuana plants, complicating the ability to control a drug dose. Thus, at this time, there are no generally accepted medical or prescription uses for marijuana in pets.

For more information, visit Poison Control Center information on marijuana:

www.aspca.org/pet-care/poison-control/plants/marijuana.aspx

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