

The Hot CBD Trend for Pets - Risky or a Godsend?

by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

Cannabidiol (CBD) products for dogs and cats are now flooding the market as more and more pet parents search for nontoxic remedies for pain and other conditions in their animal companions. There's considerable confusion all around regarding what, exactly, cannabidiol is and does, and how it differs from medical marijuana, since knowledgeable pet owners realize that exposure to marijuana can be toxic for dogs and cats.

As an integrative practitioner, I feel it's extremely important to clarify the confusion surrounding the CBD issue because I've found this herbal remedy to be incredibly beneficial for a multitude of different medical and behavioral issues in veterinary medicine. By identifying the misconceptions surrounding this plant extract I hope more pets will be provided the opportunity to experience the benefits of CBD.

Cannabidiol Primer

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 (tetrahydrocannabinol) found in marijuana. Since it's considered to have a wider range of medical benefits than THC, it can be a win-win for pets.

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 versus 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.

Humans, dogs, cats and all creatures with a spinal column have an endocannabinoid system (ECS). The ECS was discovered fairly recently and named for the Cannabis sativa L. plant species due to the plant's ability to dramatically affect it.

The job of the ECS is to regulate functions such as eating, sleeping, relaxing, protecting and forgetting by maintaining homeostasis via activators and receptors located in the central nervous system and immune system. Cannabinoids function as messengers for the ECS, and according to Bark magazine:

“Their effects depend on the receptors to which they bind. This is a very specific process; a receptor will only accept the particular compound for which it exists, and is unaffected by others.”

Why Pet Parents and Caregivers Seek Out CBD Products

Lynne Tingle, who founded the Milo Foundation, a pet adoption center and animal sanctuary, uses edible cannabis products and ointments with senior dogs for both health and behavioral problems. As Tingle told Fox Q13 News:

“You just see a real difference in their spirit. They’re just not in pain, so they’re happier and they’re moving better ... They just get a new lease on life.”

The news outlet also spoke with the owners of a company that makes cannabis tinctures for treating pet anxiety, loss of appetite, pain and inflammation, diseases like cancer and glaucoma, and kidney and liver problems. Co-founder Alison Ettl said:

“What we find is a lot of the animals are coming to us when there are no other options and pharmaceuticals haven’t worked for that animal. They’re at that last resort, and cannabis is really good for those types of situations.”

Dr. Rob Silver, a veterinarian and herbalist and my primary resource for all things CBD-related, explains that one of the most common applications for CBD is for anxiety and behavior issues in dogs. It seems to work very well at low dosages for hyper dogs.

Further, cannabinoids have a strong affinity for the brain and nervous tissue and are able to easily cross the blood-brain barrier. This makes them helpful for certain types of seizure disorders as well as applications like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Pain management is another area where CBD products shine, even in cases of cancer pain.

The New York Times described the case of a 12-year-old chow-shepherd mix who was diagnosed with bone cancer and unable to tolerate a prescription painkiller. His owner bought him a cannabis-based tincture, and within four months he was able to reduce his painkillers while moving “with some of his old swagger.”³

Dr. Silver also described a client with a dog who had osteosarcoma (bone cancer) and was in a great deal of pain. The owner decided to offer cannabinoids to his pet, and after just five days, the dog was able to begin putting weight on the leg with the tumor.

CBD Studies in Pets

Recently at the Colorado State University Veterinary Teaching Hospital, Dr. Stephanie McGrath, who specializes in treating seizure disorders and inflammatory brain diseases in animals, completed a study of CBD for the treatment of epilepsy in dogs. Results of the study are scheduled for publication later this year. According to Bark magazine, one of the most important findings was that nearly 90% of dogs given CBD experienced a reduction in the frequency of seizures.

Another study recently completed at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine in collaboration with a manufacturer of CBD oil, concluded that 2 mg/kg of cannabidiol oil twice daily helped increase comfort and activity in dogs with osteoarthritis.

The Canine Brief Pain Inventory score and the Hudson activity score were used to assess pain and lameness in the dogs, and the researchers observed that the results support anecdotal reports of CBD oil's benefits. Veterinary assessments, the pain inventory and the activity score showed a significant reduction in pain and an increase in activity in the dogs who received CBD treatment.

The research team is currently conducting a similar trial with cats, and there are additional studies planned to evaluate the use of CBD oil in treating acute pain, behavior issues and during chemotherapy for pets with cancer.

Sources for CBD Products for Pets

Dr. McGrath at Colorado State used a CBD product manufactured by Applied Basic Science Corporation, and vouches for its safety. She also recommends, if you're already using a CBD product or are considering one, that you try to get a "Certificate of Analysis" which should show you how much THC is in the product (it should never be over 0.3%), how it's made, and whether it's organic and free of pesticides and other chemicals.

The Cornell researchers used CBD products made by ElleVet Sciences. Dr. Robert Silver also has a wealth of cannabis-related material and CBD products online at his Well-Pet Dispensary.

I think the most important thing to remember about CBD is that if you don't think you see improvement with one brand, I recommend trying several others, as potency, strain, extraction technique and a variety of other factors ultimately impact the efficaciousness of the end product.