

The Highs and Lows of Pet Marijuana

Stephen Sheldon, DVM

There's a buzz around town now that Colorado is legalizing marijuana. How is it going to affect Fido and little Ms. Kitty? Let me give you a word of advice: stash your stash, guard your Ganga, and hide your hemp. Store it high and out of reach. This is not a joke.

I am going to break it down into the good, the bad and the ugly, and it is not all bad or ugly. There may be indications for medical marijuana use in pets. Disclaimer: this does not mean "party on with your pets Garth".

Here is the bad. A study by a local ER Group and Colorado State University published in 2012 found a 4-fold increase in toxicity in states where medical marijuana is legal. We can only expect the number of poisoned dogs and cats to mushroom sky high once marijuana becomes available at retail outlets across Colorado January 1, 2014.

The problem is, just like a lot of Americans, dogs and cats like the stuff. No, they won't toke on a joint, take a hit off your pipe or drink bong water, but they surely will eat it. Right out of the baggie too or from one of those yummy edible marijuana infused products you are hiding so carefully from your children.

Many edible preparations are made with cannabis butter that is cooked into them making them irresistible for dogs and cats. Add a double whammy of another well-known pet toxin, dark chocolate, that is in many of these baked products and it can be a lethal combination.

Here is the ugly. "It's a really bad trip for them" stated veterinarian Paige Lorimer, in The Steamboat Today newspaper. If your pet consumes marijuana they will appear very depressed, may cry out, and have trouble walking. Their eyes may become dilated and red, they may have a very slow heart rate and they may become comatose. Pets become very anxious, it is unnatural for them to be intoxicated and they are uncomfortable with the feeling.

There is no anti-dote for marijuana in pets nor is there a reliable test. Care is aimed at removing it from the GI tract via stomach tubes or giving activated charcoal, a medical compound designed to absorb toxins. If caught early we can try to make your pet vomit it up; however, since marijuana is a potent anti-nausea medication in and of itself, this is often unsuccessful. IV fluids are usually administered and supportive care is provided for clinical signs such as low heart rates and seizures.

Fortunately, most dogs recover, but it may take a few days. THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, has a fairly high lethal dose in dogs and cats. Only 2 dogs out of 125 in the study mentioned above died and it was unclear whether it was from the marijuana or the chocolate in the edibles they ate.

Here is the good. Good, you say? Totally! A perusal of discussion boards on the highly popular veterinary subscription website, VIN (Veterinary Information Network) shows people are successfully using medical marijuana, or MMJ, to manage a few medical conditions in their pets. Pain from cancer, surgery and arthritis, anxiety, brain tumors, nausea, anorexia and bowel disorders are the most popular uses.

However, you are unlikely to get advice from your veterinarian, on the record, about how to use medical marijuana for your pet. Here is why; I will let the American Veterinary Medical Association website explain: "Physicians in states where medical marijuana is sanctioned are exempt from prosecution by the state for recommending the schedule I drug to patients. Such protections do not apply to veterinarians, for whom it is illegal in every state to prescribe or recommend marijuana to treat a patient."

It is a hazy subject and many veterinarians feel it is only a matter of time before MMJ is made available to our pets. Surveys show a large majority of pet owners would use MMJ if it could help alleviate pain in their pets; 96% of 600 respondents in one survey responded "fer sure dude" (actually they just said "yes"). Twenty states and DC have legalized marijuana for medical use. And every veterinarian I have talked to has been asked by their clients about using MMJ for their pets.

Dr. Douglas Kramer, a self-described 'clean-cut' veterinarian from California, has written a book, *Sweet Serenity*, which guides pet owners on how to use MMJ. Dr. Kramer, who recently died at the age of 36, started using tinctures of medicinal marijuana on his own pet, Nikita, when she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. The results were so astounding he decided to re-direct his career, build a website and write a book.

The goal of those using MMJ in pets is to alleviate symptoms of pain and disease with doses that do not cause toxic effect. Using Tylenol as an example, Dr. Kramer's website explains: "Taken at the correct dosage.....Tylenol safely relieves headaches and other forms of pain in humans. However when too much is consumed, it can cause liver failure."

Dr. Susan Klein, a holistic oriented veterinarian in Edward, Co agrees, "We are not trying to get pets high, we are trying to use doses that positively affect disease with minimal side effect." She has had a few clients use MMJ successfully for anxiety and cancer pain and finds that MMJ can also work together with traditional pain meds; "we can end up using much lower doses of traditional pain meds which are often narcotic based. That's a good thing!" said Klein.

On that note I need to re-iterate that it is uncool to get your dog high. In fact, it is a form of animal abuse which is a crime. But if you have had a momentary lapse of judgment and give your dog marijuana, or if your pet accidentally poaches on your stash, have the courage to admit it to the veterinarian at the ER who is trying to save your pets' life. One of my life commandments is: If you mess up, fess up.

Stephen Sheldon, DVM, practices at Gypsum Animal Hospital. He can also be heard on KZYR radio, 97.7 FM on Monday Mornings at 8 am for Pet Talk. E-mail questions or topic suggestions to drsteve@gypsumah.com or visit the hospital website www.gypsumah.com