



# Your Pet on Pot

*There's a growing market in medical marijuana for animals. Just what does that mean for your dog or cat?*

BY KATE ROPE

**JAYME KENNEDY'S DOG, A WEIMARANER NAMED Cooper,** developed debilitating separation anxiety around the time he turned 1 year old. "He followed me from room to room. I couldn't be out of his range of vision," says Kennedy, a writer in Los Angeles. "It got to the point where if I had to leave the house, he would completely fall apart. If someone knocked on the door, he would lose his mind and drag his crate across the floor. And we're talking about a 125-pound dog." So Kennedy sought help from her vet, who recommended "doggie Xanax," but, says Kennedy, she "didn't want to put him on anything long-term that could affect his personality."

Instead, Kennedy—who has family in the burgeoning business of cannabis—sought out therapeutic doses of CBD oil (one of the components of

marijuana) to calm Cooper. And she says it's working. "He doesn't try to bust out of his crate when someone knocks on the door. He's gotten so much better. It helped in a major way."

Cooper is in good company. As more states loosen marijuana laws, the market for pet therapeutics is growing. And many owners like Kennedy believe the drug helps their animals. In fact, a study in the Spring 2016 issue of the *Journal of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association* found that, among people who had purchased hemp products for their pets, more than 64% of dog owners and 66% of cat owners felt the pets benefited. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has taken note of the rise in people's use of cannabis on their pets and in 2017 called for roadblocks on research to be lifted.



*It is crucial that owners seek medical advice before giving marijuana to their pets. Products with high doses of THC can be toxic to them.*

### The science behind marijuana for pets

Within the cannabis plant you will find more than 80 components that have medicinal value, says Stephen Katz, founder and president of Therabis, a company that produces treatments for pets made from hemp oil. “The two that have been studied most extensively are THC and CBD.” THC is what gives pot its psychoactive properties, accounting for the high people experience when they use it.

CBD stands for the 60 or more cannabinoids found in marijuana. These chemical compounds—which do not create a high—are also produced naturally by mammals, including humans, cats, dogs and horses, in the endocannabinoid system. They play a role in the body’s anti-inflammatory and pain-management systems. Animals and humans have endocannabinoid receptors as a part of this system, which makes them susceptible to the effects of CBD from cannabis.

“It’s built into our bodies,” says Jaime Gaynor, a veterinary anesthesiologist in Breckenridge, Colo., “so it’s no surprise that people think these compounds will work.” Although THC may have medicinal value for people, pets are particularly sus-

ceptible to the psychotropic element of it (they can suffer seizures, coma or death), so most research and product development for pets is focused on CBDs derived from hemp (a cannabis plant that has extremely low levels of THC).

Animals might potentially reap some of the same benefits from CBD as people seem to, says Lisa Moses, a research fellow in bioethics at the Center for Bioethics at Harvard University. “I’m a palliative-care and chronic-pain veterinarian, and lots of my patients have the same problems as people with cancer and chronic illness have—loss of ap-

petite, nausea, loss of mobility. I would love to see a therapy available that would address those problems.” But, says Moses, the research is not there yet.

### The research void

“Research on cannabis for the veterinary-patient population is in its infancy,” says Narda G. Robinson, president and CEO of CuraCore Integrative Medicine and Education Center in Fort Collins, Colo. “Just like for humans, the research money has been severely restricted because of the legal regulations around studying marijuana.” All products derived from the canna-

bis plant, including hemp oil and CBD, are classified as Schedule I drugs, meaning they are considered to have little to no medical benefit and a high potential for abuse. “Because marijuana is considered illegal by the federal government, you have to go through a lot of obstacles to get permits to get marijuana to study it,” says Moses.

That frustrates practitioners who see potential in these treatments. “It’s crazy that hemp, especially, is still considered a Schedule I drug by

the federal government,” says Gaynor. “Hemp has zero addiction potential, and we have great physiologic data now emerging that it can be really beneficial. It can be beneficial for lots of different types of pain. We have also found that it can be really beneficial for anxiety, and in a number of dogs it can have an antiepileptic effect pretty consistently.”

Up until recently, animal experts have had nothing but anecdotal evidence and studies on humans to guide their way. Last fall, the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California, Davis, launched the first large, peer-reviewed study of the

use and effectiveness of CBD products for pets. And two studies are underway at Colorado State University investigating CBD as a treatment for osteoarthritis and seizures in dogs.

### Why veterinarians want more research

Officially, the AVMA does not have a position on medical marijuana for pets, because “it is against the law in every state,” says Mike Topper, the president of the AVMA. “Veterinarians making treatment decisions have to be in compliance with federal, state and local laws and regulations.”

But meanwhile, people are using cannabis on their animals in record numbers—and many are finding that it helps. The AVMA’s advocacy arm has taken notice and is pushing for changes that would make more research possible. The AVMA already considers it essential to share information about toxicity with its member vets. “We help explain what is known about cannabis in animals, but there is not a whole lot known.”

### The wild West of pot products

With 60-plus CBD compounds, and many different plants, there is no guarantee of consistency between products, notes Gaynor: “Just because a plant from one place has an effect, it doesn’t mean a plant from another place will have a similar effect.”

Additionally, since there is no regulation of these products, there is absolutely no guarantee that their labels accurately describe the contents. “There might be undesirable ingredients not listed on the label,” says Robinson, “including contaminants, pharmaceutical compounds and unidentified species of plants and/or animals. We also typically don’t know the amount and nature of pesticides, herbicides or fungicides used in the growing and storage of the plant product.”

The biggest risk may be what pets are accidentally getting from cannabis remedies, agrees Gaynor. “Hemp has been used in the past to help pull toxins out of the soil. There could be some products that have very undesirable compounds in them.”

There are independent laboratories that will test CBD products for contaminants and ensure they contain the compounds advertised in them, so Gaynor says it’s important for anyone interested in using these products to do due diligence on them.

“I’ll contact the companies and ask for a laboratory analysis of what’s in the product, and they

will invariably say, ‘No, it’s proprietary information.’ I don’t buy into that,” says Gaynor. “Drug companies come up with new drugs all the time, but they need to tell us what’s in them. There are probably only a couple of companies that will say, ‘Here’s the analysis—here’s exactly what’s in it.’” Gaynor urges clients to buy pet cannabis products only from a supplier who is willing to provide that analysis.

### The danger of THC

One thing veterinarians can say for sure is that the rise of the legal-marijuana movement has led to a spike in pets accidentally getting into edibles and suffering overdoses. Although there are no national figures, a study conducted in Colorado found that the number of cases of marijuana toxicity in pets quadrupled over a five-year period as licenses for human medical marijuana mushroomed in the state. “In my hospital, I see at least one case a day in which a pet ate their owner’s marijuana or edibles and is sick,” says Moses. “They have urinary incontinence, weakness in the hind end; sometimes they have altered states of consciousness and may be stuporous or even comatose.”

On the other hand, anecdotal evidence shows that CBD is safe for pets. “It seems you can increase the dose pretty significantly without any side effects,” Gaynor says.

### What pet owners should know

Robinson cautions clients to not try CBD without a visit to the vet. “The ideal approach would be consulting with their veterinarian first in order to find out what the problem might be and then examine the options,” she says.

“I get inquiries every single day from pet owners,” says Gaynor. “I guide them away from marijuana and into hemp and tell them the main concern is transparency. We want to use a product that we’re confident in. Often they ask, ‘Will I be able to take my dog off all his pain medication?’ And I say, ‘Probably not. This needs to be a multimodal approach, and CBDs are likely to be one part of the puzzle.’ I recommend people seek out veterinarians who can guide them through this.”

But until clinical research catches up with the practice of using CBD on pets, veterinarians are being forced to help patients like Cooper without much good science to guide the way.



*Companion Cannabis, a marijuana tincture for dogs and cats made by Holistic Therapeutics, is available at La Brea Compassionate Caregivers, a dispensary in Los Angeles.*