

Essential Oils and Dogs

Sniff Test

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Essential oils are aromatic, naturally occurring chemical components of plants that are usually extracted by distillation. Thorough lab testing of these chemical constituents has led to an understanding of their benefits, and in recent years, interest in therapeutically blended essential oils for canines has increased. The questions are: Do they work, are they safe and are they preferable to pharmaceuticals?

Most essential oils have been found to confer benefits of one kind or another—among them, anti-infectious (antiviral, antifungal, antibacterial), sedative, anxiolytic (anti-anxiety), immunostimulant and expectorant. For example, lavender essential oil is soothing to the central nervous system, and a 2006 study showed that its use reduced dogs’ movement and vocalization during travel; the lavender species was not identified, but was probably *Lavandula angustifolia*. The study’s author went on to conclude: “Traditional treatments for travel-induced excitement in dogs may be time-consuming, expensive or associated with adverse effects. Aromatherapy in the form of diffused lavender odor may offer a practical alternative treatment ...” (Wells 2006).

A study of a more traditional (i.e., pharmaceutical) treatment method involved 37 dogs and the use of diazepam for anxiety-related issues. Separation anxiety, for example, one of the most common canine behavior problems, is diagnosed in 20 to 40 percent of dogs (Schwartz 2003). Although 18 dog owners found diazepam “somewhat effective” in relieving their dog’s anxiety, 19 discontinued its use due to adverse effects such as agitation, increased activity, increased appetite, vomiting and/or diarrhea (Herron 2008). A number of drugs have similar laundry lists

of unpleasant effects, which can make the use of essential oils—among them, lavender, petitgrain, sweet orange, marjoram and vetiver—more appealing.

It's no wonder that some veterinarians are interested in essential oils' possibilities and are experimenting with them. In a survey sent to members of the American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association, 15 respondents reported significant use in their practices, and in quite disparate ways (Keith 2010). They were diffusing lavender in waiting and exam rooms, using essential oils for odor control, doing light massage with frankincense, blending lemongrass in sweet almond oil for cruciate or joint injuries and using a sequence of seven essential oils in a Terminally Ill Energy Transition Set to help animals adjust to impending death and let go (Bell 2004).

In addition to veterinarians, aromatherapists have weighed in with their own anecdotal successes. Their uses include blends for increasing appetite; boosting the immune system; combating fatigue; and dealing with puppy teething, ear cleaning, breath, colds and congestion, separation anxiety, and many more. Application methods range from soaps and shampoos to salves and sprays.

If you're curious about this modality and want to explore it, it is important to work with someone who understands the organic chemistry of essential oils and how to dilute them appropriately. Look for a registered aromatherapist (aromatherapycouncil.org) or a member of the National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy (naha.org) in your area. Dosage and length of treatment are extremely important in order to avoid organ toxicity and reduce chances of sensitivity. For instance, tea tree (*Melaleuca alternifolia*) is considered a remarkable antifungal, but doses that work well on humans are sometimes too strong for animals, and there have been reports of adverse reactions in dogs, especially at higher concentrations (Villar 1994). A knowledgeable aromatherapist will undoubtedly opt for a different, softer essential oil in its place. In any case, this is all the more reason to involve the dog's veterinarian in the decision process.

So are essential oils safe? Anecdotal evidence and the few studies available would indicate they are remarkably effective and safe when carefully blended by someone with good training in their use. Are they preferable to pharmaceuticals? That depends on the pharmaceutical, the severity of the problem being treated and the pet's response to the drug. Ultimately, owners must decide what is best for their pets. Until more conclusive studies are available, essential oils will probably remain a complementary rather than an alternative treatment option to pharmaceuticals.

A dozen essential oils that can be used effectively on dogs:

Cardamom
Chamomile (both Roman and German)
Frankincense
Geranium
Ginger
Helichrysum
Lavender

Marjoram
Niaouli
Peppermint
Sweet Orange
Vetiver

Read more at http://thebark.com/content/essential-oils-and-dogs?utm_source=Bark%20Newsletter&utm_campaign=eea3137f89-RSS_EMAIL_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email#CEM3SBPgI6i7TyqS.99