

# More pets being poisoned by cannabis

April 20 2022, by Amy Norton Healthday Reporter

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With marijuana now legal in many U.S. states, some veterinarians are seeing more cases of cannabis poisoning in dogs and other pets, according to a new survey.

The poll, of 251 vets in Canada and the United States, found that those incidents usually end well: Most animals recover quickly, without needing a hospital stay.

But in some cases, more intense treatment is needed. And a small number of pets die after ingesting marijuana.

Veterinarians who were not involved in the study said it all sounds familiar.

"We have seen an increase [in cannabis poisoning] in the past five years or so," said Dr. Tasia Ludwik, a critical care specialist at the University of Minnesota's Veterinary Medical Center, in St. Paul. "I'd say we average about five or six cases a week."

Dogs, not surprisingly, account for most marijuana poisonings, though cats, ferrets and horses sometimes fall victim, too. The typical incident involves a curious pup who finds brownies, butter or other tempting treats that have marijuana as a secret ingredient.

In general, vets can readily spot the signs and symptoms of a "pot puppy," according to Dr. Elizabeth Rozanski, a critical care veterinarian at Tufts University's Foster Hospital for Small Animals, in Massachusetts.

"They usually come in stumbling, disoriented and dribbling urine," Rozanski said.

It's a scary situation for owners, the vets said, since they often think their pup is suffering a life-threatening condition. But after some questioning—namely, whether the animal could've gotten hold of marijuana—the cause becomes clear.

In the new study, published online April 20 in the journal *PLOS ONE*, most vets did not report any changes in the number of marijuana poisonings they'd seen in recent years. But about 40% did report a shift—almost always an increase.

That's in line with studies from the past few years that have found rising rates of cannabis poisoning among pets in the United States and Canada. Canada legalized recreational marijuana in 2018; in the United States, medical marijuana is legal in most states, while 18 states and Washington, D.C., have also legalized recreational use.

A couple of things could be behind the increases in pet marijuana poisonings, according to Jibrán Khokhar, the senior researcher on the current study.

For one, he said, the actual incidence could be rising because more people are using the drug, particularly in edible forms. Alternatively, people may be more willing to admit Fido got into the pot brownies because the drug is legal.

"I don't think we really have a good handle on the 'why' yet," said Khokhar, of Ontario Veterinary College at the University of Guelph, in Canada.

Rozanski thinks pet owners are now more forthright about having pot in the home.

"When it was illegal, it was harder to get them to admit," she said. "They thought we would report it to the police—which we wouldn't."

In Khokhar's study, most vets described scenarios where pets accidentally got hold of edibles, or sometimes dried cannabis, when no one was looking.

Of course, that was based on owners' admissions. Khokhar said it's unclear how often people might have given a pet cannabis for "medicinal" purposes.

Both Ludwik and Rozanski cautioned against that, saying people should only give their pets medicines that have been prescribed by their vet. Instead, they said, think of marijuana as any other substance you'd want to keep out of pets' reach.

Vets in the survey said they were usually able to manage marijuana poisoning with outpatient monitoring. But a short hospital stay is needed in some cases—when an animal has a particularly low heart rate, for example. Vets sometimes use IV lipid therapy to speed up excretion of the drug, Ludwik said. (Lipids are fats, and the active ingredient in marijuana is fat-soluble.)

Ten veterinarians in the survey reported a total of 16 deaths they attributed to marijuana poisoning.

However, Khokhar said, it's hard to know whether marijuana, per se, was to blame. Chocolate, for example, contains an ingredient that is toxic to dogs, so it could be the brownies, rather than the added pot, that proved lethal.

Regardless, all three experts stressed the importance of protecting your beloved pet from the misery of pot poisoning, and avoiding the expense of an emergency medical visit.

"Most dogs will recover," Rozanski said, "but you'd rather not see them go through this."

**More information:** Prevalence and characteristics of cannabis-induced toxicoses in pets: Results from a survey of veterinarians in

North America, *PLoS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0261909](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261909)

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Citation: More pets being poisoned by cannabis (2022, April 20) retrieved 30 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-04-cannabis-poisoning-cases-pets-significantly.html>

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