

I'm wondering what might happen if a dog chews on a marijuana plant or eats something with marijuana.

It may be hard to imagine, but the problem of dogs being poisoned by eating marijuana plants (cannabis) or items made with marijuana has been occurring for many years. As more states legalize the use of medical marijuana (currently 18 states plus the District of Columbia), its presence in homes and gardens is more prevalent. Since it doesn't have to be hidden any longer, it may be left out where a pet has easier access to it. Dogs may chew the leaves of a plant, eat a cigarette made of marijuana or consume brownies laced with marijuana. We have treated at least one case of the latter at our clinic in recent months. Emergency veterinary clinics report cases on a weekly basis if not more often in certain states such as California and Washington. One study done several years ago of accidental marijuana exposure cases found 96% of the patients were dogs, 3% cats, and 1% other pets.

The active chemical ingredient in marijuana is THC. When THC in the bloodstream reaches the brain, it results in behavioral changes, but also exerts its medicinal properties of appetite stimulation, pain and nausea control. The most common signs developing within 1 to 3 hours of a dog eating marijuana are incoordination, slow reflexes, sensitivity to sounds and light, sedation, dilated pupils and slow heart rate. Some dogs may become agitated or even have seizures, requiring treatment to tranquilize them. Other dogs may vomit, have low blood pressure and body temperature. Of course the severity of signs is related to the amount eaten and the size of the pet.

It is important to tell your veterinarian that your pet may have eaten marijuana as timing is critical in treatment. If a pet is presented soon enough (within 30 minutes) a drug can be given to stimulate vomiting of the substance in the stomach and prevent it from causing toxicity. If it has been in the system longer, the act of vomiting will be blocked by the THC. At that point the oral administration of several treatments of activated charcoal may reduce the drug's absorption by the intestinal tract. Intravenous fluids, nursing care to maintain body heat and prevent respiratory problems, and close monitoring are needed. Because THC is stored in fat in the body, it may take up to 4 days to leave the body, while the dog is monitored and treated.

It is rare for a dog to die from marijuana intoxication, but it has been reported.

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