



Safety Essentials for Our Pet's Essential Oils

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Disclaimer: The information in this article is not intended to diagnose or take the place of professional health care. Always contact your veterinarian in regards to any serious health concerns or issues.

Although essential oils (EO) are a great tool for helping pets, many people profit through disinformation and unsafe practices. In order to dispel the myths surrounding essential oil use with pets, it's best to consult with specially trained practitioners. Aromatherapy is a wonderful addition to your pet's care, along with good nutrition, exercise, advice from your Vet and of course, love.

What are Essential Oils?

Aromatic plants have been used for healing since ancient times. Think of Egyptian mummies and Cleopatra's beauty secrets, China's salves and teas, and India's Ayurvedic medicine. Yet, aromatherapy as we know it today is still a relatively modern development; named by Rene-Maurice Gattefosse, a French chemist and perfumer, who was famously burned in a laboratory explosion in 1910 and treated himself with lavender. Gattefosse coined the term in his book, *Aromathérapie*, in 1937 to distinguish the medicinal use of the oil from the aesthetic application.



Gabriel Mojay, in his book, *Aromatherapy for Healing the Spirit*, defines aromatherapy as, “the controlled use of essential oil to maintain and promote physical, psychological and spiritual well-being.” It's important to note that aromatherapy can be elevated to a healing art, working with the life force of the plant, rather than solely looking at its use as a pharmaceutical substitute. Essential oils are the volatile substance (readily evaporates) extracted from the leaves, flowers, bark, seeds and roots of aromatic plants. This fluid is considered to be the life-force of the plant, similar to breath.

Essential oils serve many different purposes for the plants. The oils protect the plants from insects, defend against bacteria and fungi; prevent other plants from growing near and competing. The oils also attract bees and others to aid in pollination, and so to reproduce while resins help heal their wounds. When distilled, these same qualities are then passed on and can assist in our healing. Such oil properties can include antibacterial, antimicrobial, analgesic, sedative, immune-stimulant and antidepressant characteristics all to “promote physical, psychological and spiritual well-being.” There are many aspects that influence the quality of a plant and its oil: climate, altitude, soil, as well as the conditions under which they are distilled. When buying an essential oil, the label should specify the oil by its common name, botanical name, country of origin; method of distillation, may also include chemo-type, part of the plant used, and how it is grown; i.e.. organic or wild-crafted, when applicable.

Some companies insist that their oils are superior because they are "therapeutic grade", but these claims are only sales hype as there are no grading standards for essential oils in the U.S. The surest way to assure a quality EO is suitable for aromatherapy is to purchase it from an established company recommended by professional aromatherapy groups or individuals.

There are various methods used to produce these precious oils. Most EOs are obtained from steam distillation, where steam is forced through the plant material and carries the liquid components through the still where it is cooled and collected in a vessel. The volatile oil floats on top and is separated from the remaining fluid, called hydrosols. The hydrosols are also used in aromatherapy but are very gentle and more fragile than essential oils.

Another method is cold expression used for citrus oils. In this method, the rind is punctured and pressed releasing the oil (because the outer rind is used, organic citrus oils are preferred).

How to Use Essential Oils

How do we use this wonderful gift from the plants? For the purposes of this article, we are addressing their use for dogs, not any of the other animal companions we might have, especially, cats, birds and reptiles.

There are three main methods in using the oils, direct inhalation, diffusion and topical application.

Direct inhalation can be accomplished by putting 1-2 drops of a diluted EO in your palms, rub them together, and carefully present to the dog without touching its nose. Wait for a response and allow the dog to move away if it chooses to. Also, one can dilute the oil in a non-staining carrier, such as Jojoba, and place a few drops on the dog's bedding, or a drop placed on the dog's chest.

It is best not to put oils on the paws at all, unless addressing a paw condition.

Diffusing is a wonderful way to share the oils. An ultrasonic diffuser is a safe, easy and effective way to disperse the oils. Place a few drops of essential oil in the water reservoir and the scent is distributed much like a humidifier. Most of these units have an automatic timer marking interval and volume. When using this method, make sure that cats have an out and birds will not be affected.

Topical application is another great method for working with dogs. For this application, the essential oils must be diluted in a carrier, and can be included in massage oils, grooming sprays or a few drops added to a good quality natural shampoo. People can also apply oils in a compress, where a towel is immersed in water containing a few drops of oils and is then wrung out. Proper use of these methods allow for an effective and wonderful aromatic bonding experience. All of these methods can be enjoyable for both dog and human, effective especially if the olfactory perception difference is respected. According to Alexandra Horowitz in her book, *Inside of a Dog*, she says, "the tissue of the inside of the nose is entirely blanketed with tiny receptors...human noses have about six million of these sensory receptor sites, sheepdog noses over two hundred million, beagle noses over three hundred million." Most essential oils are very effective at very low dilutions and the sensory experience will be much more welcomed if the dog's extreme sensibility is not offended.

Safe Use

Kelly Holland Azzaro RA, CCAP, CBF, LMT, of Ashi Therapy, a distinguished educator, practitioner and frequent contributor of *Dogs Naturally* writes, "It is important to note that while aromatherapy is commonly used by humans, animal aromatherapy is different and requires specific educational training in regards to the safe use of essential oils with our animal friends. Just because something may be good to use on a person, does not mean it will be the same for our pets."

To use the essential oils safely, they need to be diluted with a good quality natural carrier. The term carrier is derived from their purpose in carrying the essential oil onto the skin. For example; vegetable, seed or nut oil, like olive, sesame or macadamia oil are all excellent choices for carriers, as well as, healing plant substances like aloe vera gel. These carriers also have healing qualities of their own and will enhance the treatment. This should not be considered weakening the essential oil but making it available for effective and safe use.

AIA states about dilution: "Essential oils are concentrated substances, and because of this we do not recommend using them without diluting them first. Add essential oils to a carrier oil, such as jojoba, coconut, almond, or others, before using. Diluting them in this way provides a measure of protection from skin irritation, allergic reactions, and even sensitization.

Unsafe Use

One comment often heard that promotes unsafe use is, “If redness or a rash develops, that’s good; it’s detoxing.”

Marge Clarke of Nature’s Gift responds, “It’s not detox! You are NOT detoxing. You have a chemical burn.”

Unfortunately, there are many unsafe EO recommendations, made popular by untrained individuals including: distributors, internet sites and even veterinarians. Using essential oils undiluted or neat is one of the most common mistakes people make and easily avoided. One such controversial practice is the “Raindrop Technique”. *Raindrop Technique is a special way of applying several (often 8-9) different oils topically over the spinal area.*

The following is an excerpted statement published on AIA’s website about Raindrop Technique.

“Raindrop Technique (RDT), Aroma Touch and similar techniques do not meet the criteria for safe practice, as defined by the AIA Standards of Practice. There have been reported adverse effects regarding RDT, in particular. These techniques are typically practiced as a one-size-fits-all technique, and may not be suitable for people with compromised liver or kidney function, those with heart disease, those on blood thinning medication, those with allergies to aspirin and other disorders.”

For the full statement go to: www.alliancearomatherapists.org/aromatherapy/aromatherapysafety/

Gabriel Mojay explains, “There are reasons for avoiding this practice (RDT), especially in vulnerable groups, such as infants, children or the elderly: First, the risk of skin reactions increases with essential oil concentration, and the widespread use of raindrop technique could lead to an escalation of skin allergy to essential oils. Undiluted thyme and oregano oils, for example, pose a risk of skin irritation. Second, when essential oils are applied undiluted to the skin, percutaneous absorption may lead to relatively high constituent concentrations in the bloodstream, which increases the risk of systemic toxicity. Wintergreen oil, for example, is moderately-to-severely toxic, and many basil oils are potentially carcinogenic, with recommended dermal use levels of below 2%. Finally, the risk of drug interactions is increased. Topically applied, methyl salicylate can increase the anticoagulant effect of warfarin, causing side effects such as internal hemorrhage (Le Bourhis & Soenen 1973), and wintergreen oil contains 98% methyl salicylate.”

Another unsafe practice involves taking essential oils internally without supervision.

AIA’s statement about internal therapeutic use:

“AIA does not endorse internal therapeutic use (oral, vaginal or rectal) of essential oils unless recommended by a health care practitioner trained at an appropriate clinical level. An appropriate level of training must include chemistry, anatomy, diagnostics, physiology, formulation guidelines and safety issues regarding each specific internal route (oral, vaginal or rectal). Please refer to the AIA Safety Guidelines for essential oil use.”

Much information is available online and one should use caution and/or consult with a certified practitioner when looking for advice. Explore aromatherapy through professional organizations like, NAHA (www.naha.org) or AIA (www.alliance-aromatherapists.org). NAHA has a specific reference for animal safety on their site. www.naha.org/assets/uploads/Animal_Aroma-therapy_Safety_NAHA.pdf

Kelly Holland Azzaro aptly summarizes the value of aromatherapy in the treatment of both pets and humans, and the caveats that one should heed when choosing the appropriate essential oil to apply, “Aromatherapy can be a wonderful tool to help animals on many levels: emotional support with issues such as; separation anxiety, to minor aches and pains. Pet owners should be aware that there is a difference in true aromatherapy which includes safe use of essential oils, versus marketing hype and promotion of unsafe use/techniques with essential oils for people and their animal friends. Be aware and ask questions, don’t assume that all essential oils may be used with pets.”

The following situations involve the use of lavender (*Lavandula augustifolia*) oil and epitomize this particular EO's effectiveness with pets. The first one is recounted by Elizabeth Ashley Starns, author of, *The Secret Healer, The Complete Guide to Clinical Aromatherapy and Essential Oils for the Physical Body*. The other is an incident concerning Chuck's and Ginger's dog, which they'll relate.



“(My dog) Bella was scared by a train the other day- bolted and ripped all her back/ bum on barbed wired. She had surgery (cost me nearly £600!), loads of stitches and the collar of shame. When she did it, she was growling and quite savage, so we put lavender on her immediately to keep her calm on the way to the vet's. She stopped snapping and let us just help her. Then after surgery, I kept the wound from itching by spraying it with lavender and rose hydrosols. The vet was amazed how fast it healed and how mellow Bella was. “



“We were out of town taking a bike ride one spring day with our elderly beagle, Jake. He was riding in an adjusted child's bicycle carriage, when he fell out of the cart and onto the gravel. The side of his face was scrapped, raw and painful. Applying helichrysum (*Helichrysum italicum*) with aloe vera gel lessened Jakes pain enough to allow the wound to be cleaned. We continued to apply aloe with lavender for a few days and he healed beautifully. Jake began strutting around with his battle wounds, where we were all so proud of his courage. “

Ginger Andro, R.S.P.E.P. has certifications in aromatherapy and natural perfumery from the Open Center with Debbie Freund, and is a certified Animal Aromatherapy Level II Practitioner from Ashi Therapy, a registered S.P.E. practitioner from Dr. Bruce Berkowsky, and a professional member of NAHA (National Association of Holistic Aromatherapists), A.I.A. (Alliance of International Aromatherapists). In addition to being artists who make natural perfumes for their art, Ginger Andro and her husband, Chuck Glicksman, are the co-founders of Kiki & Friends 100% Natural Aromatherapy for pets.

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