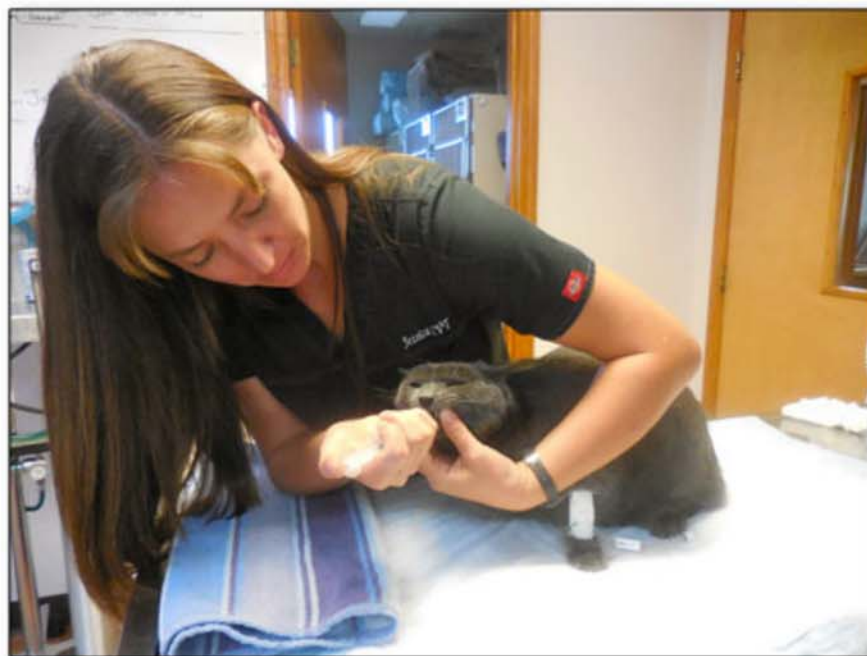


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Riverview Animal Hospital vet technician Jessica Krafthefer gives oral activated charcoal to Dudley, a cat that ingested marijuana. While he has seen many dogs for the same situation, Dr. Randy Hays says this was the first cat that has been brought in./ Photo courtesy Riverview Animal Hospital

Securing the Scooby snacks

The straight dope on marijuana toxicity in pets

by Jen Reeder

Back in 1995, Durango resident “Terri” made her sister a special Christmas present: a dozen marijuana cookies. Her delighted sister packed the container of cookies in her

suitcase to save for later. But Terri’s beagle Bono had other ideas.

“We all went out for dinner, and when we came back, Bono was sitting in the corner of the couch just swaying side to side, eyes really glassy, just looking at us,” Terri said. “Usually he’d jump down and greet us, but he was just sitting there.”

Bono had eaten all 12 of the cookies, and had a “sedate” night. The next morning, he wouldn’t eat his breakfast, so Terri didn’t hesitate to call her veterinarian at Riverview Animal Hospital in Durango. She was a little nervous to admit he’d eaten an illegal substance, but her concern for Bono trumped everything.

“It was more important to take care of my dog,” she said. “They put him on an IV and he got better. He lived another nine years after that, into old age.”

Randy Hays, DVM and veterinarian at Riverview Animal Hospital, said the practice saw an increase in cases of pets accidentally eating cannabis after medicinal marijuana became legal in Colorado. And he expects another influx now that recreational marijuana is legal within city limits.

“It has been documented that a four-fold increase of toxicity in pets was seen with the decriminalization of marijuana for medicinal use,” Hays said, noting that two dogs died in Colorado. “Now that recreational use of marijuana has been decriminalized, the potential for accidental exposure to both pets and children is even greater.”

This presents a particular challenge since marijuana potency has increased so much in recent years. Hays said traditional side effects observed in stoned dogs included lethargy and stumbling when

walking. But with the higher THC levels in today’s marijuana plants and edibles, side effects can be much more serious, including agitation, restlessness, hyper-excitability, photophobia (fear of light), incontinence, excessively low heart rates and seizures.

“I’ve seen some come in – smaller dogs in particular that get more THC per pound of body weight – that sometimes skip those side effects and go right into seizures,” Hays said.

JusttheFacts

What: Marijuana Toxicity in Pets presentation

When: Tues., Oct. 14, 6 p.m.

Where: Basement of Riverview Animal Hospital, 670 S. Camino Del Rio

He said one sign that dogs are transitioning into more serious side effects is when they become hyper-excitable and panicky after being mellow. Because the toxins can continue to recycle through the animal's system for several days while stored in the gall bladder, it's important to call your veterinarian as soon as you suspect your pet has eaten marijuana.

"No one's here to pass judgment – we're just there to try and help the animal," Hays said. "And the sooner we know what the animal may have ingested, the more quickly we can help our patients."

Hays said before calling, try to prevent your pets from hurting themselves by securing them in a protected, safe area. Then give as much information as possible about when and what they ate.

"What was the carrier – was it the plant? Was it liquid THC? Was it butter? Was it a pastry or some type of food? That stuff is all broken down and digested very differently, so we'll treat them differently depending on how much they've been exposed to and what form it came in," Hays said.

He said in some cases, a veterinarian might give instructions on how to induce vomiting with hydrogen peroxide. This can work for an hour or two after a pet eats a plant or leaf material (though check with the veterinarian about the amount to give based on your pet's weight). But it usually doesn't work with edibles, Hays said.

"If they ate a stick of butter, they're going to be so affected by the amount of THC that gets rapidly absorbed within the already fatty edible – being butter – that within 20 to 30 minutes there's no sense in inducing vomiting. They'll be too sick to try."

Hays said one of the new treatments for marijuana toxicity in pets is IV lipid emulsion therapy, which infuses fat into the bloodstream. But before IV lipid emulsion was available for routine use in veterinary medicine, Hays was still able to save a 5-pound Pomeranian after it ate marijuana and started having seizures. He pumped the dog's stomach and gave it an enema, IV fluids, activated charcoal, muscle relaxers and anti-seizure medication.

"I was treating with anything and everything I had," Hays said. "Fortunately we were able to save the dog, but it was in the hospital for four days. A very, very sick dog."

Hays said there's no specific type of dog that tends to eat marijuana, but some pups just seem particularly drawn to it in any form; he once treated a French bulldog with mild symptoms that licked up pipe residue tapped onto a driveway during a party. And the day before recreational marijuana sales started in Durango, he treated his first cat for marijuana toxicity.

The cat, named Dudley, consumed about a gram of marijuana leaf trimmings – fortunately on a full stomach – and the owner called immediately. Dudley suffered from slowed mental activity, dilated pupils, stumbling, photophobia, hypothermia and nausea. Hays treated him by inducing vomiting and giving him IV fluids, activated charcoal and other care for seven hours before his clinical signs were resolved.

He said the big takeaway is that prevention is the best medicine.

"Make sure that stuff is locked away," Hays said.

It can take diligence with determined pets. Durango resident "Corndog" grows marijuana for medicinal purposes, and his Catahoula mix Caliber has managed to ingest marijuana several times, including by going into the garbage to lick cheesecloth used to make ganja butter. Corndog typically monitors Caliber's behavior (usually marked by a drawn look, low energy and wobbly legs) and lets her play outside.

"I do feel like she seeks it out," he said.

Mason Tvert, director of communications for the Marijuana Policy Project, which lobbies for state and federal marijuana reform, said the organization recently launched a "Consume Responsibly" campaign that directs people to keep marijuana away from kids and animals.

"Just as you would not want to leave a glass of liquor sitting out on a table where a young person or a pet could reach it, you don't want to leave a marijuana product sitting out where it can be accessed," Tvert said, adding, "Voters and elected officials around the country are keeping an eye on what's going on in Colorado ... and it's going to play a role in debates that are taking place in other states."

Allen St. Pierre, executive director of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), a nonprofit that has worked to end marijuana prohibition for over 40 years, said the eyes of the world are also on Colorado.

“I cannot tell you how important Colorado is for this ... as it is right now, Colorado has a monopoly on the data regarding what happens in a modern society when marijuana is so called ‘legalized.’”

St. Pierre said there is an emerging ethos in Colorado to store cannabis products in locked safes in homes with children or animals.

“Put products in there – do the prudent thing,” he said.

St. Pierre said discussing marijuana toxicity in pets illustrates the evolution of legalization over the years.

“The conversation, say in 1991, was more like, ‘Well, if you smoke marijuana as a male, you develop breasts’ – that conversation is now very, very far in the rearview mirror,” St. Pierre said. “Now we’re having conversations about ‘As marijuana becomes legal, how do we keep pets safe?’ For me, that feels like a remarkable degree of progress.”

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