

**Aromatherapy for Dogs –  
A Natural Approach to Our Four-Legged Friends**

by Sandra Kost

## **Aromatherapy for Dogs – A Natural Approach to Our Four-Legged Friends**

Aromatherapy for dogs is much more than buying a shampoo scented with lavender. Pure therapeutic grade essential oils have medicinal properties that can help remedy a variety of physical and behavioral problems in dogs if used properly. Funda Alp, the director of communications for the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association states "...pet owners have become increasingly interested in maintaining the good health and wellbeing of their pets...they are using products containing natural ingredients and exploring alternative or nontraditional options in current health services" (Pet Age Magazine).

### What is aromatherapy?

Aromatherapy is the use of plant substances that have been extracted into essential oils, to encourage good health, equilibrium, and well-being. Essential oils are extracted from grasses, leaves, flowers, fruits, bark, wood, needles, twigs, roots, and resins shrubs from all over the world. Each essential oil has its own unique medicinal qualities, characteristics, and therapeutic effects (Dechen 6).

### What are essential oils?

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines essential oils as..."any of a class of volatile oils that give plants their characteristic odors and are used especially in perfumes and flavorings and for aromatherapy". A more in depth definition from The National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy (NAHA) defines essential oils as: "physical in nature and composed of complex mixtures of chemicals." It is the composition of those chemicals that give the oils their characteristics.

Long before aromatherapy was used on humans it was tested on dogs and horses. It began in 1912 when the father of modern aromatherapy French Chemist Rene Maurice Gattefosse badly burned his hands and treated himself with lavender oil. He marveled at the speed of recovery and jumped in to the study of essential oils using dogs and horses as test subjects. In modern times, French veterinarians and physicians prescribe essential oils so often that some are covered under insurance. Conventional medicine usually treats dogs with antihistamines and steroids, with little research as to why the dog has the issue. Only in recent years is aromatherapy looked at and gained acceptance, primarily due to the French veterinarians who use essential oils in their practice (Bell, 1).

#### Are essential oils safe for dogs?

It is important to note that the American Veterinary Medical Association has established guidelines on the use of complementary and alternative therapies with animals, but states no position on aromatherapy's results. "It's a very contentious issue and at this point, we don't have enough answers," says Craig Smith, a veterinarian and staff consultant for the Illinois-based organization (Flanigan).

However, there are a large number of believers that if used properly; most essential oils are safe. Each individual oil comes with specific precautions that should be reviewed before administering any remedies. Dr. Richard Palmquist, DVM wrote a great article titled Pet Aromatherapy and Essential Oils: What You Need to Know and states: "Used properly essential oils can benefit people and our animal friends." He goes on to explain that to reduce the chance of sensitivity or organ toxicity, he will only use an oil for up to two weeks and then provide a rest period.

Methods for safe use of essential oils for dogs include topical for spot application, massage therapy for the whole body, and paw care. Inhalation therapy may also be used with aromatherapy tools such as a nebulizer or atomizer-diffuser, or with a spray bottle to mist the room or crate the dog is in (Holland).

The following essential oils in Figure 1 are questionable and should not be used in remedies for pets according to Melody McKinnon who wrote an article for All Natural Pet Care blog. No worries, there are many essential oils as you will read shortly that are safe for your four-legged friend! It is best to avoid any questionable oils especially with the availability of so many safe oils.

Anise ( <i>Pimpinella anisum</i> )	Birch ( <i>Betula</i> )	Bitter Almond ( <i>Prunus dulcis</i> )
Boldo ( <i>Peumus boldus</i> )	Calamus ( <i>Acorus calamus</i> )	Camphor ( <i>Cinnamomum camphora</i> )
Cassia ( <i>Cassia fistula</i> )	Chenopodium ( <i>Chenopodium album</i> )	Cloves ( <i>Syzygium aromaticum</i> )
Garlic ( <i>Allium sativum</i> )	Goosefoot ( <i>Chenopodium murale</i> )	Horseradish ( <i>Armoracia rusticana</i> )
Hyssop ( <i>Hyssopus sp.</i> with the exception of Decumbens)	Juniper ( <i>Juniperus sp.</i> with the exception of Juniper Berry)	Mugwort ( <i>Artemisia vulgaris</i> )
Mustard ( <i>Brassica juncea</i> )	Oregano ( <i>Origanum vulgare</i> )	Pennyroyal ( <i>Mentha pulegium</i> )
Red or White Thyme ( <i>Thymus vulgaris</i> )	Rue ( <i>Ruta graveolens</i> )	Santolina ( <i>Santolina chamaecyparissus</i> )
Sassafras ( <i>Sassafras albidum</i> )	Savory ( <i>Satureja</i> )	Tansy ( <i>Tanacetum vulgare</i> )
Tea Tree Oil ( <i>Melaleuca alternifolia</i> )	Terebinth ( <i>Pistacia palaestina</i> )	Thuja ( <i>Thuja occidentalis</i> )
Wintergreen ( <i>Gaultheria procumbens</i> )	Wormwood ( <i>Artemisia absinthium</i> )	Yarrow ( <i>Achillea millefolium</i> )

Figure 1.

Following are the safety considerations to follow when using essential oils on your four-legged friend. ( Bell 120) It is also important to review each individual essential oil as they have their own set of precautions.

1. Always use the highest quality oils from a reliable supplier
2. Always use essential oils with other natural ingredients; don't add to synthetic

3. Don't rely on just one essential oil, use synergy – a blend is more powerful than one. Due to the complex makeup of essential oils; blending can build on each oils strength.
4. Always dilute – never put essential oils directly on dogs. An example of diluting is blending the essential oils with a balm base and using this on the dogs paws to help with dry, cracked pads.
5. Avoid essential oils that are high in phenols and ketones, and essential oils that are considered toxic.

Essential Oil Constituent Classification	Possible Constituents in Essential Oils	Examples of Essential Oils Containing These Constituents
<b>Ketones</b>	Pinocamhpone, thujone, pulegone, camphor, menthone, verbenone	Hyssop, helichrysum, pennyroyal, peppermint, sage, thuja, wormwood
<b>Phenols</b>	Thymol, carvacrol	Thyme, oregano, savory

Figure 2.

6. Dogs' sense of smell is about 50-100 times stronger than humans. Start with 25% of human dose (i.e 3 drops to 1/2oz base oil)
7. Introduce essential oils gradually in small amounts and watch carefully for any indications that the dog is upset by the oil (panting, drooling, whining, and rubbing face on carpet). Let them smell it first.
8. Use essential oil in moderation for dogs that are older, pregnant, or ill. Use hydrosols on puppies of 10 weeks or younger instead of essential oils
9. Be careful with epileptic and seizure-prone dogs – rosemary can influence an onset of seizures in human. It is believed that calming oils can help reduce the amount of seizures, but it has not been clinically researched.
10. When in doubt always use less. A dog cannot tell you how it feels.

11. Do not use essential oils in the eyes, near the eyes, directly on the nose, anal, or genital areas. Flush eyes with water, sterile saline solution, or milk until clear.
12. Discourage ingestion- dogs will lick and a small amount won't hurt if you have used quality natural ingredients that are safe. However, try to avoid as much licking as possible.
13. Serious signs to watch for are vomiting, diarrhea, depression, lethargy, weakness, excessive drooling/salivation, mouth sores, seizures, tremors ([ASPCA Animal Poison Control](#))

Some of the common ailments that may respond well to the use of aromatherapy on dogs are allergies, anxiety, bad breath, burns, congestion, cracked paw pads, cuts, deodorizing, dirty ears, fatigue, fear, flatulence, flea and tick infestations, general detoxification, grief, hyperactivity, hyper sexuality, incisions, infected ears, insect bites, insomnia, itchy skin, joint and muscle pain, loss of appetite, mange, motion sickness, skin infections or irritations (hot spots), teeth cleaning, teething pain, unhealthy fur and coat, weak immune system (Bell).

The following table shows a few essential oils that work well for some of the common ailments.

<b>Ailment</b>	<b>Essential Oils</b>
<b>anxiety, stress, grief</b>	Frankincense ( <i>Boswellia carteri</i> ), Lavender ( <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i> ), Neroli ( <i>Citrus aurantium</i> var. <i>amara flos</i> ), Chamomile German ( <i>Matricaria recutita</i> syn. <i>M. chamomilla</i> )
<b>Insect repellent, anti-fungal, anti-septic</b>	Niaouli ( <i>Melaleuca quinquenervia</i> ) MQV, Patchouli ( <i>Pogostemon cablin</i> ), Lemongrass ( <i>Cymbopogon citratus</i> ), Rose Geranium ( <i>Pelargonium x asperum</i> ), Cedarwood Atlas ( <i>Cedrus atlantica</i> )
<b>Injury aches and pains</b>	Marjoram, Sweet ( <i>Origanum marjorana</i> )
<b>Immune stimulant</b>	Thyme ( <i>Thymus vulgaris</i> )

Figure 3.

Just recently, I made a massage oil blend with Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), my dog, Sunny got in to it (I rubbed some on my leg, which was transferred on to my bedsheet), she rubbed her face on it a few times and wouldn't leave that spot on the bed. My dog is very

hyper; however, that evening she was the calmest I have ever seen her! So, I tested this a bit more, by diffusing lavender in my bedroom and it worked again, she was so calm, she slept in the same spot in the bedroom all night.

Another way I use aromatherapy for my four-legged friend is for her cracked paws. I created a paw balm blend of sunflower, coconut, shea butter, beeswax and the following essential oils: Niaouli (*Melaleuca viridiflora*) for its bactericide and antiseptic properties. I also used Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) for its antifungal and anti-inflammatory properties as well as its calming effect. Lastly, I chose Rose (*Rosa centifolia*) for its antiseptic properties as well as for dry and sensitive "skin", along with combating anxiety and stress. I used 50% of the amount of essential oils to the carrier oil blend of that that I would use on an adult. The results have been quite impressive. I have applied the balm nightly for 5 days straight, and then I applied it 3 times a week for two weeks and Sunny's paws are smooth, she doesn't scratch you anymore when she gives you her paw! The first few times she fought me and I had to distract her while rubbing the balm on her paws; now she seems to enjoy it and lets me apply it. I then keep her occupied for about 15 minutes to let the balm soak in, she does lick it some, but at least most of it has absorbed in.

The following blend is a Flea-Free Essential Oil recipe from Holistic Aromatherapy for Animals that I plan to try this Spring:

- 1/2 oz base oil (hazelnut or sweet almond)
- 4 drops Clary Sage (*Salvia sclarea*) essential oil
- 1 drop Citronella (*Cymbopogon nardus*) essential oil
- 7 drops Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*) essential oil
- 3 drops Lemon (*Citrus limon*) essential oil

Store in a dark glass bottle. Apply 2-4 drops topically to the neck, chest, legs, and tail base of the dog. You can also add drops to a bandanna or cotton collar.

The following case studies show how a veterinarian, dog breeder, and an aromatherapist have used aromatherapy for our four-legged friends. These examples are helpful in giving credibility to the practice of aromatherapy for dogs.

**Dr. Karen Becker, DVM – Natural Pet Animal Hospital, Tinley Park, Illinois**

“We diffuse relaxing Lavender in the waiting room and some exam rooms, we nebulize oils for certain respiratory conditions and also mix oils with jojoba and use them topically.”

Dr. Becker has used therapeutic oils for her 11-year-old Rottweiler. The dog ruptured several intervertebral discs which also caused muscular pain. She used a blend of Marjoram (*Origanum marjorana*) for musculoskeletal analgesic effects and Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) as a neurological stimulant and then massaged this in to help ease the pain.

“We use aromatherapy on a daily basis...”. Dr. Becker’s staff uses spritz bottles of Chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) hydrosol sprayed in the exam rooms to help calm nervous pets “and owners”. They also use Citronella (*Cymbopogon nardus*) and Orange (*Citrus aurantium sinensis*) to combat fleas in spritzers and spray exam rooms down (Bell 112).

**Christie Keith, Breeder – Caber Feidh Scottish Deerhounds, Cazadero, California**

Ms. Keith has been raising dogs and cats holistically since 1986. She uses a blend that includes German Chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) to help speed healing. A favorite

“trick” of hers is to rub Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) on her hands and then cup lightly over the muzzle of a stressed out dog to help calm him quickly (Bell, 117).

**Judy Bechtel, Aromatherapist and Owner – Soothe my Soul Aromatherapy and Skin Care, Pennsylvania**

Judy’s dog Bud, had some problems with his rear left leg. The vet ruled out arthritis and ruptured cruciate ligament. Judy believed the condition came from a fall on his rump when he was chasing a squirrel. She started using an anti-inflammatory blend using Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), Cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*), Juniper Berry (*Juniperus communis*), and Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*). She states, “...working quite well and he hasn’t been holding the leg up...”. She uses this blend a couple times a day (Bell 118).

As seen in these case studies, aromatherapy has a place in the natural remedies for our four-legged friends. Many years ago when you had a sore throat you would take a “root”. Now you take an antibiotic, then you take probiotics, then you take a pill to relieve the symptoms of the antibiotic. We have lost touch with natural health remedies and their wonderful benefits for humans and we have continued this pattern with our four legged friends. Our dogs receive antibiotics and steroids for allergies without even considering what is causing the allergies. A dog with itchy ears is taken to a vet who prescribes steroid cream and pills for 2 weeks; when a simple aromatherapy blend could help remedy the ailment without the use of steroids.

Aromatherapy is versatile and can be used along with conventional medicines. For skeptics, first time users, or anyone in general; it may take a combination of the two and that is perfectly fine. It is very important to remember to discuss with your veterinarian the aromatherapy methods you would like to try as there can be contraindications with conventional medicines.

It is also important to remember to discuss these methods with an aromatherapist who has experience with aromatherapy and dogs.

Our dogs depend on us to help them and bringing back natural remedies using aromatherapy is an exciting way to do so.

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