



Is aromatherapy safe for your cat?

The ongoing discussion about the safe use of essential oils with cats is filled with confusion and discord. Some experts voice a defiant “no” while others offer suggestions for limited use. Although veterinarians have safely and successfully used essential oils in specific clinical situations, lay use is typically discouraged due to risk factors ranging from chemical composition to essential oil quality.

Scientific studies in Germany and France regarding the medical effects of essential oils on animals and humans were quite advanced by the mid-1800s. Because of positive clinical results, the practice of veterinary aromatherapy was not uncommon in these countries by the mid-1900s.

Essential oils, used in the practice of aromatherapy, are the volatile oils produced within the seed, flower, leaf, bark, root or resin of aromatic plants. These complex chemical components can be extracted by steam distillation, cold-pressing, and carbon dioxide or solvent extraction.

Plants produce essential oils for self-preservation, such as attracting insects for pollination, repelling pests, and resisting microorganisms that can destroy the plant. Because they are an inherent part of a plant’s biochemical makeup, your family, including your pets, may already be exposed to minute amounts of essential oils from exposure to garden plants as well as plant products such as teas, capsules, and catnip toys.

Why essential oils are potentially harmful to cats.

Whether topically applied, ingested or inhaled, essential oils are absorbed into the bloodstream and metabolized in the liver. Hepatic glucuronidation is an important detoxification mechanism present in most mammals, but not cats. According to Kristin Leigh Bell in *Holistic Aromatherapy for Animals* (Findhorn Press, 2002), because cats lack the liver enzyme, glucuronyl transferase, they are not well-equipped to metabolize essential oil components.

Susan G. Wynn and Barbara Fougère, authors of *Veterinary Herbal Medicine* (Elsevier Health Sciences, 2007), list potentially toxic essential oils including basil, birch, clove, hyssop, oregano, pennyroyal, savory, tansy, tarragon, tea tree, thuja and wintergreen. They also note that tea tree toxicosis has been found in some cats, and the salicylates present in birch and wintergreen are one of the substances that cats metabolize slowly, making them more susceptible to toxicity.

PetEducation.com warns of exposure to citrus oil extracts such as d-limonene. Used in shampoos, insect repellents, food additives and cleaning products, these substances can cause liver damage in cats.

Toxic buildup can go unnoticed for years. Cats that are despondent, clumsy, uncoordinated, trembling, vomiting, drooling, or dazed might have elevated enzyme levels and impaired liver function, which could lead to death.

The case for hydrosols.

Hydrosols, also called hydrolats or hydrolates, contain the water-soluble parts of steam-distilled plants as well as minute amounts of essential oil components. Because toxicology studies have found certain components, such as monoterpene alcohols and their metabolites, in the urine of cats exposed to them, it appears that cats can tolerate hydrosols better than essential oils.

According to Robert Tisserand, aromatherapist, author and consultant, “The hydrophilic molecules [readily attracted to water] that are found primarily in hydrosols are more easily metabolized by mammals than lipophilic molecules [readily attracted to fat], since they do not have to be changed into water-soluble form for urinary excretion.”

Lia Whitmore, a certified clinical aromatherapist and national certified master groomer with over 20 years of experience, uses grooming products specifically designed for cats, none of which contain essential oils. Although Whitmore believes that hydrosols are considerably safer for use with cats, she does not advise the oral use of hydrosols, unless under the close supervision of a qualified veterinarian.

But Suzanne Catty, clinical aromatherapist, author, and CEO at New World Organics, shared that “after 15 years of using hydrosols on felines both topically and internally in cases like dental problems, I have seen no negative effects from using hydrosols on cats.”

Catty’s extensive research has shown that using authentic, properly stored, fresh hydrosols free of preservatives, alcohol and stabilizers, is safe for cats. Using certified organic and sustainably wildcrafted hydrosols also insures no fertilizer or pesticide contamination.

“Cats have been known to ‘ask’ their owners for a hydrosol,” said Catty. “When it comes to hydrosols with functions such as flea repellent blends, cats seem to recognize their benefits.”

Using essential oils can be done safely.

As a general guideline, Tisserand believes that the occasional use of essential oils totaling no more than 1% of the product is generally safe for cats.

Lisa Davis, a registered aromatherapist, is extremely cautious when using essential oils with her cats. Davis “never applies them directly to the cat, generally offering them from a distance through diffusion only.”

When diffusing, maintain good ventilation and circulation of fresh air. Make sure your cat can leave an area that is being diffused.

Reduce your cat’s exposure by diffusing for specific reasons, and only when necessary. According to Bev Day, president of Rocky Mountain Aromatherapy Institute, “diffusing for 15 minutes just 3 to 4 times a day or during nighttime sleep can be adequate essential oil therapy even during family illness.”

While not all cats may react negatively to all essential oils, exercise caution and watch your cat for subtle changes in behavior as well as a lack of energy. Using essential oils with cats can be managed, and it is generally believed that limited exposure to quality pure essential oils is a better option than using synthetic or adulterated fragrances.

