

Essential Oils and Cats: Are They Safe?

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Essential oils have been a mainstay of alternative medical therapies for many years now, in aromatherapeutic use, as well as topical and ingested remedies. With the rise of social media and home marketing companies such as Young Living and doTERRA, the use of these oils has become more mainstream within the past few years. Indeed, even I was excited to receive an essential oil starter kit as a gift this past Christmas. A few weeks ago, I came across a BuzzFeed article titled “People Are Freaking Out Because They Just Learned Essential Oils Can Hurt Cats,” and after being asked about the issue from a veterinary perspective, I decided to do some further research.

According to the Pet Poison Helpline, “Essential Oils are volatile, organic constituents of plants that contribute to fragrance and taste. They are extracted from plants via distillation or cold pressing.” Many people use essential oils for aromatherapy, flavorings, personal care products, insecticides, and herbal remedies. While the use of these essential oils is often seemingly innocuous, they can be toxic to pets, particularly cats.

Cats lack certain liver enzymes that help them detoxify certain compounds, and are therefore more sensitive to toxicity from oils that contain the compounds that they cannot break down. According to the Pet Poison Helpline, the essential oils known to be toxic to cats are¹:

- Oil of wintergreen
- Oil of sweet birch
- Citrus oil (d-limonene)
- Pine oils
- Ylang Ylang oil
- Peppermint oil
- Cinnamon oil
- Pennyroyal oil
- Clove oil
- Eucalyptus oil
- Tea tree oil

Essential oils are rapidly absorbed across the skin, orally, and through the respiratory system. Symptoms of toxicity can manifest in different ways, depending on oil and route of exposure, and can include¹:

- Drooling
- Vomiting
- Reduced heart rate
- Respiratory distress
- Burning sensation of the nose and throat
- Low body temperature
- Tremors
- Wobbliness or incoordination
- Liver failure

If you notice any of the above symptoms, please contact your veterinarian immediately, and move them to an area of fresh air, away from the oil in question^{1,2}.

Essential oils have been used in alternative or conjunctive therapies with cats, but these should always be used under close supervision of a veterinarian. Not all essential oils are created equal, and you should always use a high-quality oil from a reputable company. As with most medications and therapies, “the dose makes the poison,” and even an oil that is safe for use in cats can be toxic if too concentrated². To ensure the safety of your feline friends, here are my general rules for use of essential oils:

- Stick to water-based diffusers, and never diffuse an oil of any type in a room with your cat without leaving your cat some means of escape. Cats are smart, and if there’s a certain scent that they don’t like, they will do their best to get away from it^{1,3}.
- Use oils sparingly and err on the side of being too dilute when adding oils to be diffused. Cats’ sense of smell is so much better than our own, so if something smells strong to you, it certainly does to your cat³.
- Don’t apply any kind of oil topically to your cat unless you have specifically had it checked out with your veterinarian first. The proper dilution of an oil can mean the difference between helping and harming your cat¹.
- Stick to oils that are known to be safe with cats. Avoid oils from the list above. Some essential oils safe for use with cats include lavender, chamomile, catnip, spearmint, copaiba, frankincense, geranium, patchouli, rose, and valerian³
- If you have a question as to the safety of an oil, just ask your veterinarian! We may not know the answer right off but we can get you the right answers.

References

¹ Kia Benson, DVM, Associate Veterinarian, Clinical Toxicology, "Essential Oils and Cats," January 12, 2018, Pet Poison Helpline.

² Stephanie McNeal, "People are Freaking Out Because They Just Learned Essential Oils Can Hurt Cats," January 10, 2018, BuzzFeed.

³ Melissa Shelton, DVM "Which oils are safe to use around (insert my cat, dog, bird, etc...) and which are not?" 2014, AnimalEO, Essential Oils for Animals.