

Herbal Medicine For Your Dog

Many modern medications are compounded from herbs, but herbalists believe that the plant in its pure state has more effective properties.

Herbal medicines usually are manufactured as a liquid or a powder in capsule or tablet form. Be aware of any herbal medicines that are bought over the counter rather than provided by a veterinarian. The effectiveness of an herb depends on the type of soil in which it was grown, the type of fertilizer used, the health of the plant, and when and how the plant was harvested. There are no quality control standards for herbal medicines, so it's important to choose one from a company that researches its herbs carefully. Reputable companies adjust their formulas to compensate for increased or decreased potency, so look for a product whose label explains how the herbs are prepared. An expiration date is a must.

Popular herbal medications include echinacea, goldenseal, and ginseng. Commonly used by people to ward off colds, echinacea is purported to break down immune complexes and possibly neutralize viruses. Holistic veterinarians may use it for direct antibacterial effect or to stimulate the gums to resolve gingivitis. Although the latest research shows no benefit from echinacea, including it in your dog's diet is not known to be harmful.

Goldenseal has a reputation for relieving pain, healing wounds, stopping bleeding, and fighting off bacteria. It is more powerful than echinacea and must be used carefully since it can be toxic in high doses, and long-term use can damage the liver. Goldenseal contains alkaloid complex organic bases which can be both helpful and harmful, depending on how they're used. The alkaloids in goldenseal, hydrastine and berberine, are believed to reduce inflammation of mucous membranes, work against bacteria and fungi, and stimulate the immune system. Signs of goldenseal overdose include nausea, vomiting, and a decrease in the white blood cell count.

The root of the ginseng plant has played a major role in Chinese medicine for thousands of years. One of its benefits is that it strengthens the immune system by increasing resistance to stress. Ginseng is also believed to aid metabolism, improve skin and muscle tone, and protect against cancer. Like most herbs, however, ginseng is not a quick fix. It may take weeks or even months to work.

Another example of botanical medicine is the use of Bach flower essences. These are extracts of about 30 different kinds of flowers. They were developed in England in the early twentieth century to address particular characteristics or emotional states in a natural way. They include the well-known Rescue Remedy, which is a commercial product that contains five different flower essences and is useful for pets (and people) with anxiety. Other Bach flower essences are less commonly used on dogs but are used on humans for such emotions or behaviors as fear of unknown things, lack of confidence, and exhaustion following physical or mental effort. Some of these might be good for search and rescue dogs, for instance.

Other natural tranquilizers include products containing valerian root, kava kava, and St. John's wort, which are believed to have a relaxing effect on animals. Melatonin, a hormone, is another natural substance that appears to have calming properties. Neither Bach essences nor other natural products have a true sedative effect like that resulting from conventional drugs, but they can still relieve anxiety, fear, and stress. Another benefit is that they are easy to keep on hand because they can be bought over the counter and don't require a prescription. Herbs, however, can be dangerous in large doses, in animals with allergies, and when combined with a drug that is contraindicated. Consult your veterinarian before using any herb or supplement.

Next step: Homeopathy

Reprinted from The Original Dog Bible © 2005. Permission granted by BowTie Press.