

## Holistic Liver Treatments

**Natural treatments ensure liver health for your dog.**

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A partial list of the day-to-day chores a dog's liver must accomplish includes removing toxins, aiding digestion, facilitating the immune system, producing antioxidants, processing hormones, converting proteins into amino acids, producing blood-clotting factors, and metabolizing and storing vitamins and fat. It is no wonder the liver can become overwhelmed on occasion.

When a practitioner uses alternative medicines, he may use one or more methods for diagnosing disease. Most holistic practitioners still rely primarily on Western diagnostic techniques.

For liver problems, then, the practitioner would observe physical signs (jaundice, for example) and laboratory results (such as an elevated alanine aminotransferase, or ALT) to indicate liver dysfunction. A practitioner using acupuncture would also link certain emotions and seemingly unrelated physical symptoms to diagnose a liver that has, in terms of Eastern medicine, an excess or diminished flow of chi (energy).

Natural medicines for the liver. Because the liver has a multitude of functions, and because there are many ways to diagnose its problems, there are many natural directions we can take to help keep it healthy.

Quality nutrition helps make the liver's task of digestion easier, and some specific nutrients are believed to promote liver health. The amino acids arginine and carnitine are important in liver metabolism as are the supplements choline and inositol.

Antioxidants help the liver with its task of detoxification, and they can be found in many culinary herbs (spices), fresh vegetables, and fruits. Make sure your dog is receiving appropriate dietary levels of the vitamins A, C, E, B-1, B-6, and selenium.

Perhaps the best thing you can do for your dog's health is to persuade him that some daily fresh vegetables and fruits would be to his benefit. Fresh foods are an excellent source of nutrients, vitamins and antioxidants.

Whenever we use nutrients or supplements to help maintain the health of the liver (or any organ system), it is essential to maintain a balance of the nutrients being used. An excess of any one nutrient or an imbalance between nutrients that act synergistically can cause more harm than good. Check with a qualified practitioner who knows how to balance nutrients before you try to manipulate your dog's diet.

Herbal remedies. A host of herbal remedies enhance liver function, help keep the liver healthy, and help repair damage to liver cells. They include dandelion, milk thistle and artichoke.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) is one of the strongest-acting cholagogues known. A cholagogue is an agent that increases the production of bile by the liver, and dandelion does so by more than 50 percent. In addition, it has a direct effect on the liver, causing an increased bile flow to the gallbladder (cholerectic effect). Clinically, dandelion has been shown to benefit patients with colitis, liver congestion, gallstones, and several forms of liver insufficiency.

Milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) is an herb that works by acting on liver-cell membranes to prevent the entry of toxins. It also enhances protein synthesis in cells, making it an effective treatment for hepatic inflammation. Its toxin-fighting ability is illustrated by the fact that it is the only known remedy that is effective for treating poisoning by the deadly amanita mushroom (which has such common names as Death Cap and Destroying Angel).

Artichoke (*Cynara scolymus*). The leaves of artichoke enhance the regeneration of damaged liver cells and stimulate the production of bile. In addition, the herb is a potent antioxidant, further helping the liver in its detoxification role.

The beauty of using herbs is that they often provide multiple benefits. For example, dandelion is a liver and kidney tonic and a potent diuretic, making it an excellent choice for treating both liver and urinary conditions.

For herbal remedies, I prefer using the whole herb, and for most dogs, a maintenance dose of the herb can be hidden in a

meaty treat or even sprinkled over the food several times a week. For therapeutic dosages that can be administered via capsules or tinctures, it's best to check with someone who has experience using herbal medicines for pets.

We can help the liver accomplish its chore of removing toxins by helping enhance the flow of lymph. Along with herbal lymph cleansers such as yellow dock (*Rumex crispus*) and cleavers (*Galium aparine*), massage is an excellent way to accomplish this.

I like massage because it can be used on several different levels. At its most basic level, massage is nothing more than rubbing with focus and intent. To move lymph, focus your rubbing movements so they gently massage from the extremities toward the heart. Massage can also be directed to helping the liver, as with acupuncture. If you want a quality massage for your dog, you can go to a massage therapist trained in animal care or to one of several massage schools where you can learn the techniques yourself.

Acupuncture is an alternative medicine that uses thin needles specifically placed along meridians of energy (chi) flow to treat a variety of conditions. Organ systems are associated with the meridians, and the liver meridian begins at the top of the dog's inner toe of the hind leg, runs along the medial aspect of the hind leg, courses through the abdomen and liver, and connects with the lung meridian in the chest.

Acupuncturists who note a stressed liver or one that is not functioning correctly, as evidenced by physical signs or emotional symptoms such as anger, would place needles to help balance the flow of chi through the liver meridian. For home care, you can massage the dog's inner thigh and abdomen, especially along the lower and mid-rib areas along the line of teats. A second area good for the liver and gallbladder is along the back, just lateral to the spine, at the level of the lower ribs.

Flower essences (Bach Flowers). Flower essences are remedies that are used primarily for emotional problems, so they fit into the mold of thinking about the liver as an organ that is disturbed by anger or frustration. Impatiens is an essence that applies to dogs that are quick to anger, and Star of Bethlehem would apply to the animal that is angry as a result of being abused. Essences are extremely safe to use, and they can be administered in a dog's water, directly into its mouth (via droppers), or diluted and spritzed over its body.

Aromatherapy. Aromatherapy is another alternative method that may be helpful for combating liver ailments, especially when we view liver conditions as a consequence of emotional problems. Aromatherapy uses aroma for healing and works on many levels, both physical and emotional.

Aromatherapy can be used for dogs by wafting the aromas into areas where the dog stays (using plug-in atomizers, for example) or putting a small dab of the oil on the back of the dog's neck where he can't lick it off.

The oils of German chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*) are calming and relaxing, and azulene, a chemical component of the plant, stimulates liver regeneration and acts as an anti-inflammatory agent. Other aromatherapy remedies that may be helpful include Rosemary Verbenon (a chemotype of rosemary), reputed to offer liver and gall bladder support, and thyme, which is a liver stimulant.

The addition of alternative therapies opened the doors of my practice to a whole new world of diagnostic direction, a different understanding of disease, and a new arsenal of tools for health and well-being. The liver is an excellent organ to demonstrate how alternative methods expand our knowledge and application of huge number of healing methods available to us.

Randy Kidd, DVM, Ph.D., has been a practicing veterinarian for more than 30 years, with 20 years of experience in holistic healthcare. He is a past-president of the American Holistic Veterinary Association and frequent contributor to Dog World. Contact him at [thedoctorisin@bowtieinc.com](mailto:thedoctorisin@bowtieinc.com) or check out his new book *Dr. Kidd's Guide to Herbal Dog Care* (Storey Publishing).

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