**"Natural Does Not Mean Safe”**[Karen Peak](https://www.facebook.com/kpeak)

A friend from a local dog club sent out an email regarding a friend of her’s whose dog was poisoned. The dog’s owner had used Melaleuca Oil on her arms and the dog licked her arms. The dog developed serious medical problems and almost died. Not having heard of Melaleuca Oil, I did some research. Yes, this oil can be highly toxic, especially if ingested. Melaleuca Oil is commonly known as Tea Tree Oil.
How many believe natural means safe? In reality, many natural treatments can be dangerous. Pennyroyal has been used in natural flea and insect repellants. Pennyroyal can be dangerous if used on pregnant animals and by pregnant women. It can cause miscarriage, seizures and death. Black Cohosh and comfrey can cause liver damage. Garlic and onions can cause a form of anemia in pets. Ma Huang can affect heart rhythm. Marijuana ingestion (eaten by pets who may not stop after one or two of your special brownies) can cause gastric upsets, drooling, loss of coordination seizures, coma. Some herbs are safer for dogs but could kill your cat. Is your pet on anti-seizure meds? Some herbs negatively affect how other medications work. Others can worsen the side effects of medications.

Herbal preparations range in quality. This can be due to how the plant is grown, location, soil quality, how it is prepared, etc. This means concentrations of the chemicals in the plants can vary grower to grower. Herbal remedy manufacturers do not have to follow the same rules as modern medications. The makers do not have to get FDA approval before marketing and herbal remedies are regulated as dietary supplements.

Essential oils are not without risks. Citrus oils, used for insect repellants, if not diluted with something like grape seed oil, can cause skin damage. Even in low concentrations (below 5%) many essential oils can cause harm. It is amazing how many essential oils we hear touted as safe to use for whatever reason are actually toxic and can be fatal if ingested.

I attended a two day lecture on herbal and homeopathic remedies. During the lecture a woman asked for a recommendation to treat a condition she was fighting. Foxglove was suggested. Another attendee asked the woman if she had certain other conditions. The lecturer was informed the recommended herb (foxglove) could have killed the woman because she had a couple of the other conditions. The lecturer was shocked. I went to a pet herbal lecture that same year. The lecturer, a veterinarian, was recommending pennyroyal and tea tree oil as perfectly safe treatments for fleas and skin issues.

If you want to use natural treatments, steer clear of online info and ads. Instead research good botanical and herbal resources carefully. I use at least three books so I can compare information. Study drug interactions carefully. Your best bet is to find a medical practitioner who knows the benefits and risks of herbal medicines. I recommend starting with the Veterinary Botanical Medical Association ([www.vbma.org](http://www.facebook.com/l/8AQFtXQZU/www.vbma.org)): we have several members in the Northern Virginia region.
I am not against natural remedies; I have used them on myself and with my pets – after careful research. Natural does not mean safe or effective. Natural is just another way to treat conditions and we must use the same precautions we do with other medications.

Karen Peak is owner/operator of West Wind Dog Training in Prince William County, founder of The Safe Kids/Safe Dogs Project, a published author, wife, mother and the manager of a multi-dog, multi-species household.