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## UNUSUAL EATING HABITS IN CATS

### Definitions

Cats will sometimes eat strings, rubber bands, towels, or other objects, which may result in a variety of problems for both you and your pet. Not only can your possessions be destroyed or damaged, but these objects can produce life-threatening blockages in your pet's intestines. Eating non-food items is called **pica**. A specific type of pica is stool eating (either their own or that of another animal) and, while not necessarily dangerous to the animal, is probably unacceptable to you. Stool-eating is called **coprophagy**.

The causes of pica and coprophagy are not known. Many ideas have been proposed by various experts, but none have been proven or disproven. Such behaviors may sometimes be attention-getting behaviors. If engaging in one of these behaviors results in some type of social interaction between the animal and his owner (even a verbal scolding) then the behavior may be reinforced and occur more frequently. These behaviors may be attempts to obtain a necessary nutrient lacking in the diet, although no nutritional studies have ever substantiated this idea. They may stem from frustration or anxiety. It is also possible the behaviors began as play, as the animal investigates and chews on the objects, then subsequently they began to eat or ingest them.

It has been suggested that coprophagy is carried over from the normal parental behavior of ingesting the waste of young offspring. Some experts believe coprophagy occurs more often in animals that live in relatively barren environments, are frequently confined to small areas and/or receive limited attention from their owners. Coprophagy is rarely seen in cats but can occur.

Because pica and coprophagy are behaviors that are not well understood, stopping them may require assistance from an animal behavior professional who works individually with owners and their pets. A variety of specialized behavior modification behavior techniques may be necessary to resolve these problems (see our handout: "When the Behavior Helpline Can't Help").



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### Coprophagy

#### **Suggested Solutions:**

- Because the cause of coprophagy isn't known, there are no techniques or solutions that are consistently successful. The following techniques may, or may not be effective in resolving the problem.
- Treat your cat's food with something that causes his stool to have an aversive taste. A commercial product called "4-BID" is available through your veterinarian, or the same results may be achieved by using the food additive, "MSG." Based on owner's reports, both of these products appear to work in the some cases, but not always. Before using either of these products, please check with your veterinarian.
- Treat your cat's stools directly with an aversive taste by sprinkling them with cayenne pepper or a commercial product, such as "Bitter Apple." For this method to be effective, every stool your cat has access to must be treated in order for him to learn that eating stools results in unpleasant consequences. Otherwise, he may discriminate by odor, smelling which stools have been treated and which have not.
- The simplest solution may be to clean your cat's litter box daily in order to minimize your cat's opportunity to eat his stools.

#### **Health Risks:**

If you have an outdoor cat who is eating the stools of another animal that has parasites, it may be possible, although unlikely, for your cat to become infected by a parasite. Some parasites, such as giardia, cause diarrhea, and most coprophagic cats ingest only formed stools. There is also a delayed period before the parasites in the stools can re-infect another animal.

Most parasites require intermediate hosts (they must pass through the body of another species, such as a flea) before they can re-infect another dog or cat. Thus, your cat is much more likely to become infected with parasites through fleas or by eating birds and rodents than by coprophagy. Most parasites are also species-specific, meaning that cats cannot be infected by eating dog stools. Health risks to humans from being licked in the face by a coprophagic animal are minimal. For more information, please contact your veterinarian.



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### **Pica**

Pica can be a serious problem because items such as rubber bands, towels, and string can severely damage or block an animal's intestines. In some instances, the items must be surgically removed. Because pica can be potentially life-threatening, it's advisable to consult both your veterinarian and an animal behavior professional for help.

#### **Suggested Solutions:**

- Make the objects your cat is eating taste unpleasant with some of the substances mentioned above (see our handout: "Aversives for Cats").
- Prevent your cat's access to these items.
- If your cat is food-oriented, it may be possible to change to a low-calorie or high-fiber diet to allow him to eat more food, more often, which may decrease the behavior. Check with your veterinarian before changing your cat's diet.
- If you suspect that anxiety or frustration is the reason for pica, the cause of the anxiety or frustration must be identified and then the behavior can be changed using behavior modification techniques. Clicker training for instance is a good behavior modification technique that stimulates your cat's mind and alleviates anxiety and frustration (see our handout: "Cat Clicker Training").
- Sometimes pica is an attention-getting behavior. If this is the case, do not interact with your cat when you catch him ingesting an item, by saying his name or telling him "no," instead try to startle him with a loud noise. If possible, avoid letting him know that the startling noise came from you. Once he leaves the item alone lavishly praise him. Try to also set aside 10-15 minutes twice a day to spend with your cat, so that he doesn't need to resort to pica to get your attention.
- If pica is a play behavior, keep plenty of toys around for your cat to play with. Cats enjoy playing with objects they can bat around to include things like string, rubber bands, and tinsel, and ultimately ingest them. Keep these items out of reach and provide a selection of appropriate toys (see our handouts: "Cat Toys and How to Use Them"). It is also recommended to play with your cat daily. Daily interactive play sessions release energy and help alleviate stress, which can prevent behavior problems, like pica (see our handout: "Play with Your Cat").

#### **What Doesn't Work for Coprophagy or Pica:**

- Interactive punishment (punishment that comes directly from you, such as verbal scolding) is usually not effective because it may be interpreted by your cat as attention. With interactive punishment, many animals learn to refrain from the behavior when their owner is present, but still engage in the problem behavior when their owner is absent.
- Punishment after the fact is NEVER helpful. Animals don't understand that they're being punished for something they did hours, minutes, or even seconds before. This approach won't resolve the problem and is likely to produce either fearful or aggressive responses from your cat.