

Pica and Coprophagy: Pets who Eat Non-Food Items

Dogs and cats will sometimes eat socks, rocks or other objects, which could result in a variety of problems for both you and your pet. Eating non-food items (*pica*) can produce life-threatening blockages in your pet's intestines needing medical attention and surgery. A specific type of pica is stool eating (*coprophagy*) - either their own or that of another animal. While not necessarily as dangerous, most people find this behavior unacceptable.

Why is my pet doing this?

The causes of pica and coprophagy are not clear. Such behaviors may have evolved from attention-seeking behavior. 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. The behavior may also stem from frustration or anxiety. It could begin as play: the animal investigates and chews on the objects, and then subsequently begins to ingest them. It's also possible that dogs learn this behavior from other dogs.

Health Risks

If your pet has been ingesting non-food items, it is very important that you talk with your veterinarian first to rule out any medical issues. Your vet can also provide guidance on how to resolve the issue.

Because the causes of pica and coprophagy are varied and not well understood, stopping the behavior may also require assistance from an animal behavior professional who works individually with you and your pet. A variety of specialized behavior modification techniques may be necessary to resolve the problem.

Pica

Pica can be a serious problem because items such as rubber bands, socks, rocks, 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, contact both your veterinarian and an animal behavior professional for help.

Suggested Solutions:

- Consult with your veterinarian and a veterinary behaviorist.
- Prevent your pet's access to items either by removing them or by managing your pet's access. Using a crate, exercise pen or pet gate can be a simple and effective solution.
- Try to make the objects your pet is eating taste unpleasant. There are products on the market made specifically for this.
- If your pet is food oriented, consider changing her diet to allow her to eat more often, which could decrease the behavior. Check with your veterinarian before changing your pet's diet.
- If you suspect that anxiety or frustration is the reason for pica, try to identify what's causing your pet's anxiety or frustration. Once you identify the cause, you can use behavior modification techniques to change the behavior.
- Sometimes pica is an attention-seeking behavior. Try to set aside extra time daily to spend with your pet, so that he doesn't need to resort to pica to get your attention. This can include physical and mental activities such as fetch or learning a new trick.
- If pica is a play behavior, offer your pet a variety of appropriate, non-ingestible toys. Cats tend to play with string, rubber bands and tinsel, and ultimately ingest them. Keep these items out of reach and provide a selection of appropriate toys instead.

Coprophagy

Since the cause of coprophagy isn't fully known, techniques may vary in their success.

Suggested Solutions:

- Visit your veterinarian to rule out underlying medical issues. Your vet can offer suggestions on a healthy diet for your pet.
- The simplest solution may be to clean your yard/litter box frequently in order to minimize your pet's opportunity to eat feces.
- Take your dog out **on leash** (even in your yard). Once he goes, immediately call him, using the leash to guide him away from his feces. When he comes to you, reward with a treat.
- Ask your vet if you can give your dog something that causes his stool to have an aversive taste.
- Treat your pet's feces directly with an aversive taste by sprinkling them with cayenne pepper or a commercial product, like "Bitter Apple." You must treat every stool your pet has access to in order for him to learn that eating stool results in unpleasant consequences.
- To stop your dog from eating cat feces from a litter box, block access by installing a pet gate that your cat can either jump over or get under but your dog can't. Alternatively, place the box in a closet or room where the door can be wedged open from both sides, so your cat has access, but your dog doesn't. Limiting your dog's access to the litter box can also help your cat feel safe.

What Doesn't Work

Interactive punishment such as verbal scolding is usually not effective because it may be interpreted by your pet as attention. Also, your pet may learn to refrain from the behavior when you are present, but still engage in the problem behavior when you are absent. Even worse, some pets may become fearful or aggressive.

Punishment after the fact is never helpful. This approach won't resolve the problem and could produce either fearful or aggressive responses.

Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.