

Chewing Disorders and the Aberrant Appetite

Dr. Marty Becker and Mikkell Becker

©2008

Why would cats, which are almost universally characterized as finicky eaters, orally fixate on objects like fabric, string, and plastic...then proceed to suck, chew or ingest them?

Clea Simon, author of "The Feline Mystique," says her longhaired, mixed breed shelter cat, Cyrus, was addicted to plastic shrink wrap. Forget a \$3 per can delicacy served in a silver bowl. If Simon unwrapped a new CD, this ordinarily well-behaved cat would raid the trash looking for the stash of plastic wrap.

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud theorized that people put their fingers or food in their mouths, not because of hunger, but because they missed their mamma's teat. Dr. Rolan Tripp, founder of AnimalBehavior.Net believes that some kittens that are orphaned or weaned too early were never taught by their mom to stop nursing. Later in life the cat picks up where it left off, but with a synthetic mother-substitute.

While Freud never studied feline oral fixations, animal researchers have been both fascinated and perplexed by cats that have chewing disorders or aberrant appetites. Although a little chewing or sucking is normal with inquisitive kittens, it can become a problem when the behavior is repetitive or damaging to the cat or the household.

Thought to be an obsessive-compulsive disorder that can occur with any cat of any age, there appears to be some genetic predisposition. Dr. Tracey Kroll a veterinary behaviorist in Fairlawn, New Jersey says when it comes to chewing disorders, wool sucking and chewing in Oriental breeds (Siamese and Burmese) is the number one problem she sees on her veterinary behaviorist' couch.

Many of the weird chewing or ingestive behaviors in kittens can be attributed to their natural desire to play and put things in their mouths (just like human toddlers). Adult cats who suck, chew, or eat their way into an unwelcome "Extreme Home Makeover" are more likely afflicted with a compulsive disorder. It may be that these compulsive cats are simply following the adage, "If it feels good...do it!" Some veterinary behaviorists theorize that the act of chewing releases endorphins in the brain that gives cats a "meowiwowii" high. When cats suck or chew, happy-hormones get released, and before long they become happy-hormone addicts.

Cats with chewing disorders can be challenging, for the family finds itself cat-proofing the entire house, much like what's done for toddlers. "We had to 'Oreo Proof' our home," remarks Sharon Spaeth of Studio City, California about life with her domestic black and white, short hair adopted shelter cat. Spaeth was aware of Oreo's chewing habits as the plastic bowl in the shelter cage was chewed beyond recognition. But that awareness didn't prepare her to find all of the drawstrings missing from her pajama bottoms. With her raspy tongue, Oreo created "cat's pajamas" for Spaeth that would no longer stay up.

Spaeths's experience with Oreos is not uncommon. Of all the materials that attract cats, fabric (especially wool) is the winner. Fabric chewing cats seem to like the crunch of the fabric, especially those who are only fed soft foods. Many behaviorists think cats start this bad habit because they're bored, anxious, stressed or inadvertently rewarded.

The best preventive for chewing disorders and aberrant appetites is to provide kittens with proper chew toys and interactive forms of exercise. Good habits can be taught by praising the kitten for good chewing and healthy, desirable behaviors.

Some people think cats may chew fabric because of some nutritional deficiency such as thiamin, but food is seldom the culprit. Dr. Tony Buffington, clinical nutritionist at the Ohio State University Veterinary Hospital has never been asked about a cat with odd chewing behaviors that wasn't eating a perfectly satisfactory commercial diet. As such Buffington thinks pica (abnormal craving for nonfood substances) should rank well down the list of reasons cats chew crazy stuff.

Chewing disorders can cause a serious medical problem. Take for example Brenda Cox of Oscade City, Kansas, who has made numerous trips to the veterinarian with her Birman cat, Ziggy, to remove hair scrunchies he has swallowed. Ziggy also developed a hunger for Beanie Babies belonging to Cox's seven year old child. "One time Ziggy swallowed the tail of a Beanie Baby poodle, and since he was unable to deliver this "Baby" out either end, the veterinarian had to open him up to get it out!"

Dr. Ilona Rodan of Cat Care Clinic in Madison, Wisconsin, co-chair of the panel that produced the new Feline Practitioner Behavior Guidelines, says that eating substances that can cause an intestinal blockage, are the most dangerous. Dr. Marsha Reich, a board certified veterinary behaviorist in Silver Spring, Maryland, worries the most about obstructions with materials like string. Once ingested, string can become caught and cause the intestines to bunch up like an accordion. Once this occurs, the string can cut through the intestines, causing internal bleeding. "These types of obstructions have a high fatality rate," says Reich.

Sometimes compulsive chewing damage is as much mental as physical. "In severe cases, the cat is so wrapped up in sucking and chewing that it no longer plays, rests and grooms itself," says Dr. Tracey Kroll, a veterinary behaviorist from Fairlawn, New Jersey. "It forgets how to be a cat."

Experts recommend stopping this nasty habit before cats gain an appetite for it. Treatments include changing foods, increasing exercise and mental stimulation, keeping household changes to a minimum, switching "good chew" objects for bad ones, using repellents or other deterrents around taboo areas, and as a last resort, drug therapy.

Most experts agree the answer is not trying a "solution ala carte" and rather strongly encourage cat owners experiencing these problems to take their cat to the veterinarian at the earliest signs of a problem. "It's always easiest to treat both medical and behavior

problems in their earliest stages,” says Rodan. “If your veterinarian doesn’t have the answers, a behaviorist should be recommended.”

Dr. Marty Becker is the resident veterinarian on Good Morning America and the coauthor of “Chicken Soup for the Cat Lover’s Soul,” “Why do Cats Always Land On Their Feet?” and “meowWOW.” Visit his website www.petconnection.com.

Mikkel Becker is a senior communication major at Washington State University and a nationally syndicated newspaper columnist.

What cats are most likely to develop chewing disorders:

- Most common in Oriental breeds (Siamese, Burmese) although it can also be seen in any breed of cat. “One study found that Oriental breeds were most likely to show pica, and the onset was between 4-12 months of age,” says Daniel Estep, Ph.D., at www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com. “While seen in all ages, the problem usually starts at one-and-a-half to two years of age and goes up from there,” says Dr. Tracey Kroll, a veterinary behaviorist from Fairlawn, New Jersey
- Estep said most of the cats studied have been indoor cats so it isn’t clear if they are more prone to chewing disorders than outdoor cats. “May be seen more in indoor cats only because they have access to objects such as twist ties, scrunchies, wool socks, etc.,” says Kroll.
- Also believed that kittens separate from the queen at a very young age have a tendency to chew according to Ilona Rodan, DVM, DABVP, Feline Practice, Cat Care Clinic, Madison, Wisconsin.

Treatments to try before going to the veterinarian or behaviorist:

- **Feed the craving** – If your cat is craving crunch, remove the wool or plastic pacifier and give them dry food, lettuce, or whole baby carrots. Or provide alternative oral stimulation in the form of rawhide soaked in chicken broth or other dog chew treats.
- **Green grocer** – Create a cat-tractive window box filled with catnip, grass and other items designed to lure your mischievous-muncher away from the offending items.
- **Zoom around the room** – Bored cats are destructive cats. Cat owners often forget that their cats evolved as turbo-charged hunters who climbed, crept, leapt and raced in pursuit of fast food. Use cat activity centers or newer interactive toys to engage kitties mind and body. On old toys, apply a little meat spread, cheese or tuna juice to whet their appetite for some good clean fun.
- **A hunting we will go** – Eating can seem more natural if small amounts of food are hidden in a variety of locations causing the cat to have to search for the food. Tripp says with “prey for pay” feeding, this becomes a much more anticipated and enjoyable part of kitty’s day.

- **Don't eat and run** - Reich describes using food dispensing toys which require some finagling to get the food out (a feline slot machine of sorts). Reich says some cats prefer canned food because it is more mouse-like. If feeding canned food, put it in each cube of an ice-cube tray to give the cat time to process and ingest the food. This is a similar idea to a person taking only one plate to a buffet table.
- **"Same ol'" preferred** – It's been said that nobody likes change except a four-month old baby with a wet diaper. Who ever said that forgot about cats who relish predictability and prefer things (household members, furniture, litter box, brand of food, etc.) to stay the same.
- **Stop rewarding behaviors you don't want repeated** – Rodan says many of her clients unknowingly reinforce their cat chewing on inappropriate materials by giving them attention. For some cats, even negative attention is better than no attention. Reward the positive and redirect the negative, explains Rodan, by giving food treats, praise, massage, grooming, anything your cat likes. "Never verbally or physically punish your cat," warns Rodan, her voice rising for emphasis.
- **The switcheroo** – When kitty reaches for rubber or tries to get "woozy from wool," substitute a treat or play time. He'll soon learn that group-fun is better than alone time with your comforter.
- **Yuck!** – While cats don't chew fabric, plastic or wood for the taste, they may quit sticking them in their mouth if they taste yucky. You can try spritzing the offending materials with a repellent or bitter substance such as rubbing alcohol.
- **Keep off** – If a cat won't stay from a taboo object or area, you can use motion alarms or put the offending object on top of newspaper that covers a partially sprung mousetrap. When the cat attempts to reach the object, the trap snaps under the paper, and turns them into a scardy cat.
- **Bad scents make sense** – Most pets dislike the smell of perfume so mix one part cologne with 10 parts water and spray it where you don't want your cat to linger or linger. The cheaper and worse smelling the better, so look on the bottom shelf of the drug store for something with rocket fuel smell and potency.
- **Drugs** – If all else fails or a compulsive disorder has been diagnosed by a veterinarian, some antidepressant drugs may help.

The most common cause for cats to chew non-food items or exhibit excessive licking is anxiety according to Dr. Larry Lachman, author of "Cats On The Counter." The most anxiety-provoking events for a cat are:

1. New person moving into the house
2. New baby brought home
3. New pet brought home
4. Construction or strangers milling about
5. Pronounced reduction in interaction time from owner/caretakers
6. Sudden change in routine of feeding, litterbox, etc.
7. Moving to a new home