

Unusual eating habits in dogs and cats

Definitions

Dogs and cats will sometimes eat or merely suckle on clothing or other objects which may result in a variety of problems for both owners and animals. Not only can the owner's possessions be destroyed or damaged, but objects such as clothing and rocks can produce life-threatening blockages in the animal's intestines. Another form of this behavior – stool eating – while not necessarily dangerous to the animal is often unacceptable to the owner. Stool-eating (either their own or that of another animal) is called coprophagy and eating non-food items is called pica.

Explanations

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 showing these behaviors results in some type of social interaction between the animal and the owner (even a verbal scolding) then the behavior may be reinforced and occur more frequently. It has also 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 who live in relatively barren environments – who may be frequently confined to small areas and received limited attention from their owners. Coprophagy may be seen more often in dogs who tend to be highly motivated by food. It is possible that a dog may learn this behavior from another dog. Coprophagy is fairly common in dogs but is rarely seen in cats, for reasons unknown. Both pica and coprophagy may be attempts to obtain a necessary nutrient lacking in the diet, although no nutritional studies have ever substantiated this idea. These behaviors may also be frustration or anxiety related and occur when the animal is "bored", anxious or afraid. It is possible the behaviors begin as play, as the animal investigates and chews on the objects, and subsequently for unknown reasons begins to eat or ingest them. Suckling of objects may occur in animals who were weaned too young or prevented from nursing for some other reason.

Stopping coprophagy

Because the causes of the problem are not well understood, no treatments which are consistently successful are available. A commercial product, 4-BID, available from veterinarians, when put on a dog's food supposedly produces a stool with an unpleasant taste. It has been said the same result can be achieved by putting MSG (mono-sodium-glutamate, a food additive) on the food. Based on owners' reports, both of these products appear to work in some cases, but are often ineffective. Before using either of these products, check with your veterinarian. The stools can also be given an aversive taste by sprinkling them directly with either cayenne pepper or a commercial product called Bitter Apple. For this method to be effective, every stool the animal has access to for a length of time must be treated in order for him to learn that eating stools results in unpleasant consequences. It is obviously difficult for most owners to watch their dogs each and every time they defecate. In addition, it may be possible for some dogs to discriminate by odor which stools have been treated and which have not. Interactive punishment (punishment which comes from the owner) is usually not effective because 1) attempts at punishment, such as a verbal scolding, may be interpreted by the dog as attention and/or 2) many dogs learn not to show the behavior when their owners are present, but will do so when owners are absent. The simplest solution may simply be to clean the yard daily in order to minimize the dog's opportunity for coprophagy.

Any type of environmental "booby-traps" to stop a dog from eating cat feces from the litterbox must be attempted with caution. Anything which frightens a dog away from a litterbox is also likely to frighten the cat away as well. It is much better to install a baby-gate in front of the litterbox area as a cat will have no trouble jumping over it while most dogs will not make the attempt. Alternatively the box can be placed in a closet or room where the dog can be wedged open from both side (so the cat cannot be trapped in or out) a small enough distance to allow the cat access but not the dog.

Health risks

In Colorado's dry climate, parasites are not nearly the problem as in other parts of the country. A dog who is parasite free and is eating only his own stools cannot be infected with parasites by doing so. If a dog is eating the stools of another dog who has parasites, it may be possible, although still unlikely, for the dog to become infected. Some parasites, such as giardia, cause diarrhea, and most coprophagic dogs ingest only formed stools. In addition, there is a delay period before the parasites in the stools can re-infect another animal. Finally, 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, dogs are much more likely to become infected with parasites through fleas and killing and/or eating birds and rodents than by coprophagy. Most parasites are also species-specific, meaning that dogs cannot be infected by eating cat stools. Although some owners may think it unpleasant, health risks to humans from being licked in the face by a coprophagic dog are minimal. For more information, contact your veterinarian.

Pica

This can be a more 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. The chances of resolving this type of problem successfully will probably be greater if the reason for the behavior can be determined. Unfortunately, this will often not be possible, as the behavior is poorly understood. Making the objects the animal is eating taste unpleasant with some of the substances mentioned previously may be helpful. Owners may need to either prevent the animal's access to the items, and/or be very vigilante about putting socks and other such items out of reach. If the animal is very 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 diets.

Pica can be an attention-getting behavior, play behavior or a frustration or anxiety-relieving behavior. If anxiety or frustration is involved, the reason for these reactions must be identified and the behavior changes using behavior modification techniques. For attention-getting behaviors, the animal can be startled with a loud noise or a spray of water when she is caught ingesting the items, and should receive attention and social interaction from the owner when the items are left alone. Cats commonly play with string, rubber bands, and tinsel and ultimately ingest them. Owners need to keep these out of reach and provide a selection of appropriate toys.

Because pica can potentially be a life-threatening behavior problem, it may be advisable to consult both your veterinarian and an animal behavior professional for help.

Suckling behavior

Young kittens may suckle on the owners' hair, fingers, toys, clothing or other objects such as blankets and bedding. Most often, kittens showing such behavior may have been weaned too young. The items can either be made to taste unpleasant using products previously mentioned and/or the kitten can be distracted with a toy when caught suckling. An acceptable item for suckling, such as a doll's baby bottle, may be provided until the kitten matures.

There are various reports in the behavior literature of Siamese and Siamese-mix breed cats showing a tendency to suckle on and sometimes ingest woolen objects. This problem is not exclusive to this breed however, as it occurs in other breeds as well. The reason for this behavior is unknown. It has been suggested that the cat may be attracted to the odor of lanolin in the wool, but this idea has not been proven or even widely accepted by cat behavioral experts. Not allowing the cat to have access to wool items, treating them with an unpleasant tasting substance as mentioned above, or startling the cat with a loud noise or water sprayer when caught may all be helpful.

Punishment after the fact for any of these behaviors is NEVER helpful. Animals do not understand they are being punished for something they did hours, minutes or even seconds before. This approach will NOT resolve the problem and is likely to produce either fearful or aggressive responses from the animal. Because pica and coprophagy are behaviors which are not well understood, stopping them may require assistance from an animal behavior professional who works individually with owners and their animals. A variety of specialized behavior modification techniques may be necessary to resolve the problem.

Written by Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D. Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist, Denver Dumb Friends League (Humane Society of Denver)
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