



# CAT FACTS



## UNUSUAL EATING HABITS IN CATS

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"*).

### 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 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

In Colorado's dry climate, parasites are not as much of a problem as in other parts of the country. If your cat is parasite-free and is eating only his own stools, he can't be infected with parasites by doing so. However, if you have