

# Unusual Eating Habits in Pets

By Sherry Woodard

## Pica

Cats and dogs will sometimes eat non-food items such as rocks, dirt, clothing, rubber bands, or string. This condition is called pica. Once ingested, some of these items can produce life-threatening blockages in the animal's intestines and surgical removal is sometimes necessary.



The cause of pica is unknown. These unusual eating habits may be the animals' attempt to obtain nutrients lacking in their diet or may be related to anxiety, boredom, or frustration. If you witness pica in your pet, speak with your veterinarian. He or she will need to rule out medical causes and may have recommendations for how to deal with the problem.

Since pica may be caused by boredom, offer your pet a wide variety of appropriate toys, and try to prevent access to inappropriate items. Cats are often attracted to string, rubber bands, and tinsel – all of which can be detrimental to your cat's health if she ingests them. Also, make sure your pet gets plenty of social interaction; some people believe that pica may be a cry for attention.

## Coprophagy

Another type of pica behavior is stool-eating, called coprophagy. Coprophagy is fairly common in dogs, but is rarely seen in cats. Dogs have been known to eat their own or other dogs' feces, and some dogs find cat feces quite delectable. Again, the causes are unknown. There are some techniques that have been tried to eliminate this unsavory behavior, but none seem to be consistently effective in resolving the problem.

One preventive measure is to pick up daily after your dog to minimize his opportunity to eat his own feces. The dog's food can be treated with MSG or commercial products such as ForBid or Deter, which make the dog's stool taste bad. Before using any food additives, schedule a visit to your veterinarian to check for any medical cause and to talk about the dog's diet. Supplements or a diet change may help.

If your dog is eating your cat's feces, install a baby gate in front of the area where your litter box is kept or otherwise make the litter box inaccessible to the dog (but still accessible to the cat).

*Sherry Woodard is the dog training and care consultant at Best Friends. She develops resources and provides consulting services nationally to help achieve Best Friends' No More Homeless Pets mission.*

See also: Pica: The Un-Finicky Feline