

Pica and Coprophagy

- Pica is the eating of nonfood substances such as rocks and clothing.
- Coprophagy is the consumption of feces, and it is more common in dogs than in cats.
- When eaten, some objects may block the digestive tract and require surgical removal or retrieval with an endoscope.
- The cause of these behaviors is unknown, but, rarely, underlying diseases may lead to them.
- Diagnosis of underlying diseases may require blood work and fecal tests.
- Owners can prevent pets from eating objects by eliminating access to the objects, making the objects unpleasant to taste, enriching the pet's environment to prevent boredom, or, for dogs, using muzzles or leash walks.
- In some cases, owners may choose to work with a veterinary behaviorist to eliminate the behavior.

What Are Pica and Coprophagy?

Pets with pica or coprophagy eat substances that are not considered food. Pica involves the eating of objects. Dogs may be more likely to eat objects such as rocks and toys, while cats may eat clothing, strings, and kitty litter. Oriental breeds of cats are more likely to eat fabrics and wool.

Coprophagy is the consumption of feces. It is a natural behavior for nursing mothers to eat the feces of their puppies or kittens. Coprophagy is more common in dogs than in cats, and female dogs are more likely to display this behavior than males.

While coprophagy is generally more distasteful than it is harmful to the pet, eating of nonfood objects may result in vomiting, diarrhea, or a blockage in the digestive tract, which may require an emergency surgery or use of an endoscope to retrieve the object while the pet is under anesthesia.

What Causes These Behaviors?

The exact cause of pica and coprophagy is unknown. Some pets chew on objects out of stress or boredom.

Dogs may eat feces because they are not being fed enough or if they go too long between meals, but it is usually not because they are lacking a nutrient in the diet. Dogs that have been punished for defecating in the house may eat their feces to avoid further punishment.

Rarely, an underlying condition such as anemia, intestinal parasites, gastrointestinal disorders, or

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liver disease may lead to an animal eating strange objects. Administration of some drugs, such as steroids, can increase hunger and lead to pica as well.

What Are the Signs of Pica and Coprophagy?

Usually, owners either see the pet eating the objects or find remnants of the objects around the house. Cats are especially likely to eat linear objects, such as strings, dental floss, rubber bands, and yarn, which can cause serious problems in the digestive tract. Signs that a pet may have ingested an object that is causing a blockage in the digestive tract include:

- Vomiting
- Diarrhea or constipation
- Loss of appetite
- Drooling
- Lethargy (tiredness)

If you suspect that your pet may have this problem, see your veterinarian immediately.

How Are These Conditions Diagnosed?

While most cases of pica and coprophagy are simply a behavior problem, it's important for veterinarians to determine if there is a medical cause. Your veterinarian will perform a complete physical exam and ask about your pet's diet, appetite, and environment. Additional tests may include blood work, fecal tests, and, possibly, an intestinal biopsy. Usually, treating the underlying disease will help eliminate the behavior.

If your veterinarian suspects a blockage in the digestive tract, he or she will probably recommend radiographs (x-rays) and other tests to evaluate the intestinal tract.

How Can I Prevent My Pet From Eating Objects?

If there isn't an underlying medical problem leading to the behavior, the best thing to do is to eliminate access to objects the pet likes to eat. Make sure to store clothing, plastics, wool, and linear objects where your pet cannot find them. If your dog eats objects in the yard, consider a basket muzzle. However, never leave a dog with a muzzle unattended.

You can also try covering the objects with an unpleasant-tasting substance, such as cayenne pepper or bitter apple products, which are available at most pet stores.

If you find your pet chewing on something inappropriate, say "no" firmly, and give him or her

a more appropriate chew toy. Avoid punishment, which can cause stress and further exacerbate the problem.

If you suspect that your pet is eating objects out of boredom, increase the amount of attention and exercise your pet receives every day, and enrich his or her environment with appropriate toys that can't be swallowed.

For dogs with coprophagy, remove and dispose of feces from the yard immediately. Better yet, increase the number of daily leash walks and reward your dog with a treat after he or she defecates to distract him or her from the feces. Then pick up and dispose of feces appropriately.

Some owners may try sprinkling feces with cayenne pepper or bitter apple so the dog experiences an unpleasant taste, but it's generally a better idea to just remove the feces.

Your veterinarian can supply you with a product that can be sprinkled on the dog's food to give the feces an unpleasant taste, but once the product is no longer added to the food, the dog may go back to eating feces.

In some cases, a change of diet may help eliminate the problem. Consult your veterinarian before changing diets.

Because eating foreign objects may cause serious gastrointestinal problems, you may want to work with a veterinary behaviorist to eliminate the behavior.