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PICA

Pica can be defined as the eating of non-nutritive substances. In dogs, this commonly includes items such as faeces or rocks. In cats, this is commonly seen as fabric chewing, but can also include rubber bands and small metal objects.

Medical issues can underly this problem so a visit to your veterinarian is the first step in managing this problem. Tests may be done on a stool sample to rule out parasites or enzyme deficiencies that might be causing nutritional deficits in your pet. Some other diseases can also make your pet extra hungry, and some medications can also have this effect. Diseases that alter brain activity can also be involved, such as severe liver disease.

Behavioural reasons that might explain pica include normal investigative and exploratory behaviour in young animals, or play behaviour. Sometimes your pet might get attention when it eats abnormal things, which reinforces the behaviour so it becomes a strategy to get more attention. Bored pets might do this as a way to entertain themselves.

If your pet is performing pica regularly and in preference to eating normal food or performing other normal activities, then the problem may be a compulsive disorder. This means your pet has lost the ability to start or stop the behaviour and it is occurring more and more frequently.

Brain lesions and altered metabolism of certain hormones may also be involved in the development of pica.

Interestingly pica occurs in humans too, for many different reasons. A few examples include iron and zinc deficiencies, pregnancy, autism, schizophrenia, diet obsession, malnutrition and even cultural practices!



Pets exhibiting pica need to have a thorough medical examination so any health issues that might be contributing can be diagnosed, ruled out or treated.

Each individual case is unique, so there is no “one size fits all” approach to management of pica. A thorough behavioural history and assessment of your pet will be required.

Management strategies involve preventing access to the preferred objects, interrupting the behaviour, substituting the preferred object with something suitable to chew on and possibly medication.

It is very important not to punish your pet for eating odd things. If this is an attention seeking behaviour, then punishment might be considered as attention by your pet and therefore reinforce the behaviour. Another problem with using punishment is that your pet may just learn to eat odd things when you are not around. The other downfalls of punishment include increasing stress in your pet, the punishment might escalate if it isn't working and become abusive. It will create fear and distrust in your pet, and potentially your pet will defend itself and become aggressive.

Pica poses serious health risks to your pet. They may develop intestinal obstructions, damage their teeth, compromise their intake of nutritional food, inadvertently acquire toxins such as lead poisoning (from the soil or old paint), and pick up parasites regularly if they are eating faeces.

If your pet is exhibiting pica, it is essential you seek professional advice and help. The earlier the problem is addressed, the better the prognosis.

