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PETS

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Know the signs when cats eat objects

We think that cats are picky and extremely discriminating. How can it be they willingly swallow objects that can lodge in their intestines?

The answer to this question is a mystery. It could be that their hunting and stalking behavior gets the best of them. Cats like to chase and pounce on quick-

moving objects, and then ingest them as they would prey. I have observed my own cat attempt to swallow the string on her "fishing pole" bird toy. I now keep her toys in a closed closet whenever they're not in use.



ELAINE WEXLER-MITCHELL THE CAT DOC

Another possible explanation is boredom. Cats like to indulge in attention-seeking behaviors. Some cats seem to like being scolded and chased away from trouble. Playing with items they fish out of trash cans can be a game. Unraveling balls of yarn or pulling apart a carpet or drape can be lots of fun. It's even more fun for the cat when you yell and run after him!

Some cats become obsessive about certain objects. Are they attracted by a smell or taste?

At my cat clinic, the variety of objects that have been removed from cats is amazing. Rubber is one substance some cats are attracted to and then accidentally ingest.

Rubber is not very digestible, and fortunately it usually shows up on X-rays. Some rubber items we have removed include a stopper

from a vial, a Koosh ball, elastic hair ties and rubber stamps. If you notice your cat playing with small objects like these, be sure to pick them up and put them away in a drawer or cabinet.

Cats will sometimes

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swallow metal objects. We have removed sewing needles, a blue jeans button and coins from the stomachs and intestines of cats. We've also removed nonmetallic items such as leather tassels off a handbag and plastic buttons.

Surgery or endoscopy can remove foreign objects from the gastrointestinal

tracts of cats. The key to successful treatment of foreign object ingestion is early diagnosis. Objects have to be of certain composition and density to be detectable on X-rays.

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portant to recognize signs that a pet is not eating or feeling normally. The signs associated with foreign object ingestion are drooling, frequent vomiting, projectile vomiting, anorexia, diarrhea, depression and dehydration.

If X-rays do not conclusively diagnose the presence of a foreign object, one

next diagnostic step is a contrast dye study of the stomach and intestines. Despite a dye study, small strings or threads that have not progressed to intestinal bunching may still be undetectable. Abdominal ultrasound is another useful diagnostic test.

The decision to surgically explore a suspected case of foreign-object ingestion is based on examination, diagnostic imaging and lack of response to medical treatment. Although proceeding with surgery without a definitive diagnosis sounds aggressive, it could make the difference between life and death. The longer a foreign object is in the gastrointestinal tract, the more damage it can do.

Some of the foreign objects that cats eat will pass through their gastrointestinal tracts. Many owners express surprise when they

observe rubber bands or pieces of plastic bags in their cat's stools. They never knew their cat had been chewing on these things. It is impossible to monitor every move your cat makes during the day, but if you observe that your cat likes to chew or eat objects, you need to put them securely away.

Playing with your cat and having him chase flying objects on strings is healthy. It fulfills the cat's need to hunt, chase and pounce. Being aware of your cat's chewing habits and possible objects that could be ingested might save his life. If you cannot curb your cat's obsession with eating things, speak to your veterinarian about it.

Dr. Wexler-Mitchell owns The Cat Care Clinic in Orange; www.catcare.com or 714-282-2287.