

(43) DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS: CHEWING AND FABRIC SUCKING

What can I do to stop my cat from chewing?

During exploration and play, kittens (and some adult cats), will chew on a variety of objects. Not only can this lead to damage or destruction of the owner's possessions, but some chewing can be dangerous to the cat. The first step is to ensure that the cat has appropriate opportunities and outlets for play, scratching, climbing, chewing and exploration. (See our handout #50: Play and Investigation). Next, potential targets of the cat's chewing should be kept out of reach. When this is not possible the cat may need to be confined to a cat proof room, or the problem areas may have to be booby trapped. (See our handouts #51: Punishment and #4: Behavior Products). String and thread, electric cords, plastic bags, twist ties, and pins and needles are just a few of the objects that cats may chew or swallow resulting in intestinal foreign bodies and possibly the need for surgery.

Another common target of feline chewing is houseplants. The best solution is to keep the cat away from household plants whenever the cat cannot be supervised. Booby traps may also be effective. Placing rocks or gravel in the soil, mothballs, or a maze of wooden skewers can help to keep the cat from climbing on, digging in, or eliminating in the soil. Some cats may be interested in chewing on dog toys or biscuits, and feeding a dry cat food may help satisfy some cats need to chew. In some cats the desire for chewing plant material can best be satisfied by providing some greens (e.g. lettuce, parsley) in the food, or by planting a small kitty herb garden for chewing.

What can I do for my cat that sucks on wool and fabrics?

Although sucking on wool or other fabrics may be seen occasionally in any cat, the problem is most commonly seen in Burmese and Siamese cats, or Oriental mix breeds. Although some cats do grow out of the problem within a few years, the problem may remain for life. The first step in correction is to provide alternative objects for chewing and sucking. Some cats may be interested in one of the many chew toys or chew treats designed primarily for dogs. A well-cooked bone with some gristle and meat could be considered, provided the cat is well supervised and sucks and gnaws on the bone without causing it to splinter. Feeding dry and high fiber foods may also be helpful or making food more difficult to obtain by placing large rocks in the food dish, which encourage the cat to "forage". Second, be certain that the cat has plenty of play periods with the owners, or even a playmate to keep it exercised and occupied. This may require the owner not only to schedule play time, but to control the cat toys and every 1 - 3 days provide a rotating inventory of toys to stimulate usage. Other cats will respond well to training interactions with their owner, and cats can be taught tricks. Finally, cat proofing techniques or booby traps will likely be required whenever the owner cannot supervise.

Some cats are so persistent in their desire to suck wool that more drastic measures may be required. Covering chew toys with a small amount of a product containing lanolin (such as hand cream) for licking is occasionally helpful. For some cats, it may be necessary to leave the cat with one or two woolen objects to suck on, provided no significant amounts are swallowed. It has even been suggested that a raw chicken wing a day might be tried as a last resort. However, given the prevalence of *Salmonella* in uncooked chicken, microwaving would seem prudent. If these techniques do not help, then it may be necessary to use a cat cage with perches when the cat is unsupervised to avoid continued ingestion of material.

Some cats have such a strong and seemingly uncontrollable desire to suck that the condition has been compared to compulsive disorders in people. The same drugs used for human compulsive disorders may be useful for some of these cases. If your cat shows persistent efforts to suck, chew or ingest material, a consultation with a veterinary behaviorist, or applied animal behaviorist may be necessary to control the behavior.