

# 37 Cat Behavior Problems

## Chewing and Sucking

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 also some chewing can be dangerous to the cat. Because some forms of excessive licking, chewing, and sucking can be caused by health problems such as gastrointestinal disorders, all possible medical causes should first be ruled out (see (3) Diagnosing a Behavior Problem – Is It Medical or Behavioral?).

### What can I do to stop my cat from chewing?

The first step is to ensure that the cat has appropriate opportunities and outlets for play, scratching, climbing, chewing and exploration (see (108) Play and Investigative Behaviors). 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 (11) Behavior Management Products and (31) Prevention and Punishment of Undesirable Behavior). Strings, thread, electric cords, plastic bags, twist ties, pins, and needles are just a few of the objects that cats may chew or swallow, resulting in intestinal obstructions that may require surgical removal.



Another common target of feline chewing is houseplants. Ideally, keep the cat away from household plants whenever you cannot supervise your cat. When you are unable to supervise your cat, booby traps may be an effective deterrent. Placing rocks or gravel, mothballs, or a maze of wooden skewers in the soil 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. For other cats, feeding a dry cat food, especially a dental formula, or dental treats, may provide increased oral stimulation, better satisfy the need to chew, and promote slower eating. In other cats, the desire for chewing plant material may best be satisfied by providing some safe greens (e.g., lettuce, parsley) in the food, or by planting a small kitty herb garden for chewing.

### What can I do if my cat sucks on wool and fabrics?

Sucking on wool or other fabrics may be seen occasionally in any cat, but is most commonly a problem of Burmese and Siamese cats, or Oriental mixed breeds. Although some cats do grow out of the problem within a few years, the problem may remain for life (see (38) Compulsive Disorders).

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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. Feeding dry and high fiber foods or dental foods and dental treats may also be helpful. Sometimes, making food more difficult to obtain by placing large rocks in the food dish encourages the cat to “forage.” Food-dispensing toys designed for cats are also available and provide a foraging alternative. The next step is to provide the cat with plenty of play periods with the owners, or even with a playmate to keep it exercised and occupied. This may require the owner to not only schedule playtime, but also to control the cat's toys, changing and rotating them every 1 to 3 days to stimulate usage. It is possible to teach cats to perform tricks, and some cats will respond well to training sessions with their owner. Finally, cat proofing techniques or booby traps will likely be required whenever the owner cannot supervise.

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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) is occasionally helpful. In some cases, it may be necessary to leave the cat with one or two woolen objects to suck on, provided no significant amounts of wool are swallowed. 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 persistently sucks, chews or ingests material, a consultation with a veterinary behaviorist or an applied animal behaviorist may be necessary to control the behavior (see (38) Compulsive Disorders).