

## Could Your Pet's Cute Behavior Be a Sign of This Disorder?

What may appear to be funny or cute behavior in your dog or cat may not be normal at all, but a sign of a troubling disorder similar to one seen in humans. More common than many pet parents realize, this disorder can be inherited or simply triggered by something in the animal's environment.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dog and cat compulsive disorders, which are similar in many ways to obsessive-compulsive disorder in humans, are relatively common
- Repetitive behaviors in pets are thought to be a function of both nature and nurture; there may be an inherited tendency toward the behavior, but something in the animal's environment is often the trigger
- It's important that pets with compulsive behaviors be seen by a veterinarian to rule out a medical cause; it's also important to ensure that pets with the disorder are in optimal physical health
- Dogs with compulsive disorders can benefit an increase in exercise; cats also need exercise, as well as environmental enrichment

Many pet parents don't realize there are certain cute and/or funny behaviors some dogs and cats perform (for example, tail chasing) that are actually signs of a potential behavior disorder. Obsessive and/or compulsive behaviors occur in humans and many types of animals, including dogs, cats, exotic birds, horses, pigs and zoo inhabitants.

Humans with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) perform repetitive activities like washing their hands or checking that the stove isn't on, over and over and over. They can't seem to control the behavior, and constantly think about it.

Since there's no way to know what pets with repetitive behaviors are thinking, many experts refer to them as compulsive disorders rather than OCD.

Unfortunately, dog and cat compulsive disorders are relatively common. In many ways this is a result of modern day lifestyles. As much as we love our animal companions and try to provide for their health and happiness, most of us aren't in a position to allow them to live according to their true canine or **feline nature**.

If they could make their own choices, our canine companions would enjoy extremely active lives with tremendous amounts of **outdoor activity**. Our kitties are natural loners, hunters and athletes. Their place in our lives as indoor-only pampered pets really doesn't afford them the opportunity to exercise their genetic muscles.

## Nature, Nurture ... or Both?

Pets with compulsive disorders tend to be more anxious and higher strung than normal. An anxious nature may be inherited, but studies suggest environment also plays a role in triggering the expression of a compulsive behavior. According to Dr. Nicholas Dodman, writing for Veterinary Practice News:

*"Environmental enrichment alone will not normally reverse a compulsive disorder, but a stress-free, user-friendly environment can prevent compulsive behavior from developing in the first place and make relapse less likely after successful pharmacological treatment."*<sup>1</sup>

For the record, I'm not in favor of jumping immediately to pharmaceuticals to help pets with compulsive behaviors. They are sometimes appropriate in extreme, intractable cases (for example, a pet headed for the shelter) or when an animal is causing harm to himself.

They can also be beneficial as an interim measure to interrupt the cycle of behavior at the same time other less harmful remedies are being attempted. But my general recommendation is to try behavior modification along with a wide variety of natural remedies first, since every drug has side effects.

In addition, it's important not to try to prevent a dog or cat from performing a repetitive behavior with physical restraint, because it typically causes the animal more anxiety, not less. Most importantly, address repetitive behaviors the minute you notice they're happening; OCD doesn't go away without intervention, so intervene as soon as you identify a problem.

## Similarities Between Compulsive Behaviors in Humans and Dogs

Two of the most common OCD-like behaviors in dogs are obsessive licking which results in acral lick dermatitis (ALD), also known as a lick granuloma, and tail chasing.

A study published by researchers in Finland suggests that dogs with tail chasing, air biting, obsessive pacing, trance-like freezing, or licking or biting their own flanks have a disorder similar to OCD in humans.<sup>2</sup> A number of features of tail chasing dogs are similar to obsessive-compulsive humans, including:

- People with OCD and tail chasing dogs begin acting out their behaviors at a young age
- Both are inclined to engage in more than one compulsive activity
- Nutritional supplements in the form of vitamins and minerals are beneficial in reducing the behaviors in both people and dogs
- OCD is linked to childhood trauma and stress; tail chasing is seen more often in dogs that were separated too early from their mothers
- Certain people with OCD are on the shy, inhibited side, and this tendency is also seen in tail chasing canines

In cats, common obsessive behaviors include wool-sucking (pica, or the eating of non-food substances) and **psychogenic alopecia**, which is hair loss and baldness from excessive grooming.

## How Physically Healthy Is Your Pet?

I recommend taking your dog or cat to the veterinarian for a wellness exam to ensure the source of the repetitive behavior is indeed behavioral and not a physical condition, such as thyroid disease, that needs to be addressed. And of course I always recommend optimizing the physical health of your dog or cat by:

- Feeding a **nutritionally balanced, fresh, meat-based diet**
- Making sure your pet is getting daily, rigorous exercise sessions that promote good muscle tone and body weight, and provide for a strong and resilient musculoskeletal system and organ systems
- Ensuring a balanced, functional immune system that is strong enough to protect your pet from disease, but not over-reactive to the point of creating allergies or autoimmune disease
- Engage in daily boredom busters, including play, "brain games," enrichment activities. or a dog play group that keeps his daily life interesting and diverse

In my experience, there are very few extremely healthy, physically active pets with intractable compulsive disorders, so I can't overstate the importance of helping your dog or cat be as healthy and active as possible.

## Tips for Dog Parents

Most dogs, especially larger breeds, aren't as physically active as they're designed to be. It can be a challenge to tire out a big dog, especially one of the working or sporting breeds. If your dog is performing compulsive behaviors, try increasing his exercise.

Some suggestions include walking or hiking, swimming, playing fetch or tug-of-war, biking with your dog using a special dog bike leash, jogging, or getting involved in obedience or **nose work** events, flyball, agility or other sports.

I also recommend helping your dog stay mentally stimulated with chews and treat-release toys.

## Tips for Cat Parents

Changes in routine are extremely stressful for kitties. If a cat in your household is exhibiting repetitive behaviors, the first thing you'll want to do is de-stress her environment and stick to a daily schedule she can depend on.

Cats are independent. They are most comfortable when they feel in control of their world. The more you can do to help your cat feel in control, the less stress she'll endure. Environmental suggestions for your kitty include:

- Feeding and routine care (litterbox scooping, brushing, etc.) should happen at about the same time each day
- Keep food bowls and litter boxes in the same spot — don't move them around unnecessarily; keep litter boxes scrupulously clean, as well as bedding
- Provide a variety of appropriate cat toys, **hiding boxes**, scratching posts/trees, etc.
- Consider playing soothing music for an hour or two each day
- Also consider treat or food-dispensing toys for cats, window perches, and kitty videos; open the drapes and blinds in your house every morning
- Spend some time each day playing and interacting with your cat

- Discuss calming nutraceuticals for obsessive behavior in cats with your integrative veterinarian

## Sources and References

[Texas A&M University School of Veterinary Medicine & Biological Sciences. Recognizing Compulsive Disorders In Dogs And Cats. July 6, 2023](#)

[VetStreet October 25, 2016](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Veterinary Practice News, November 21, 2012](#)

<sup>2</sup> [PLoS One: Environmental Effects on Compulsive Tail Chasing in Dogs, July 26, 2012](#)

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