

# Kitty Toy Alert – These Toys Can Harm Your Cat or Even Prove Deadly

These toy menaces can bring on medical emergencies, demand surgery or even prove fatal to kitty — even those made by reputable manufacturers. So your best bet is to not even have them in your home. How many of these risky toys are hidden in your kitty's toy stash?

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Several types of innovative toys are available to entertain your cat, but experts say they're not always safe and can even be lethal
- The way a cat's tongue is designed is something like sandpaper, in that the surface is made up of small barbs that face backward, which benefits a cat when grooming, but practically forces the animal to swallow things
- Some people wonder whether catnip is addictive or hallucinogenic to cats, but there are other factors that can render this seemingly harmless herb a toxin that you may never have thought of
- Cats have been catching birds for millennia, but they don't usually ingest the feathers; however, feather toys pose a problem when cats end up eating them anyway, as veterinarians can attest
- If you happen to notice that your cat has stopped chasing and is now chewing on their toy, it's time to intervene

***Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published June 21, 2018.***

There may be thousands of cat toys on the market, all designed to snag the interest of those sweet but lion-hearted felines who own our houses and that we call pets. You'll find wands, teasers, multi-level marble rollers and sparkly balls, all fulfilling their job of entertaining our kitties and even getting them in on a little exercise while they're at it.

Something you may never have considered, however, is that some cat toys, even many manufactured by reputable and well-respected toy manufacturers, might pose hazards that could injure or even prove fatal to your cat. Here's one reason why, according to veterinarian Katarina Luther, owner of Cat Care Clinic in Madison, Wisconsin:

*"... [B]ecause of the simple but clever anatomy of a cat's tongue. The common sand paper feel of a cat's tongue is actually many small barbs that face backward, which benefits a cat when grooming. When presented with a material like a string or other fabrics, these barbs can act like Velcro and practically force the cat to continue to ingest and swallow the item, rather than spit it out. Once swallowed, the toy can then cause serious problems if not recognized and treated quickly."*

Among the feathers, bells and colors that catch the fancy of our furry feline friends, the following is a list of seven to be mindful of when you purchase or toss them a toy.

## 1. Catnip



While some might be worried that *Nepeta cataria*, commonly known as catnip, might be addictive or some kind of hallucinogen for their cats, they need not fear, although it is intriguing that cats seem to go a little crazy when they're in a patch of the real thing in a garden, or when someone throws down a catnip-stuffed toy.

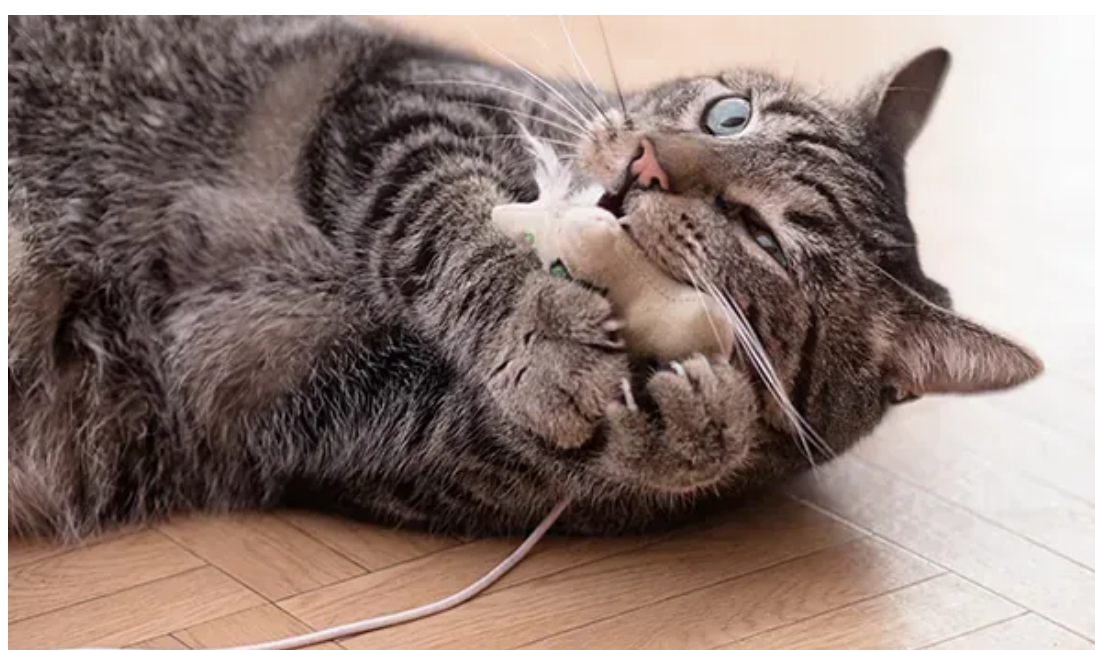
The Catnip Times calls catnip an attractant. Known as nepetalactone, it's also a pheromone, as it secretes a unique blend of chemicals that trigger the giddy kitty response. They simply enjoy it. In fact, one study shows cats are "biologically programmed" to respond to it, although the reason why is more elusive.

So there's nothing inherently harmful in catnip unless the herb itself has been stored improperly, it got wet or even damp, and became moldy, which can cause tummy problems. Pet MD comments more specifically:

*"Questionable catnip from low-quality suppliers can lead to gastrointestinal problems because of mold exposure from improper storage, or from the pesticides or herbicides used on the plant before harvest. Cats experiencing a negative reaction from poor quality catnip might drool, stop eating or have diarrhea. To avoid black-market catnip, look for US-based toy makers that grow their own herbs."*

If you want to go one step further, consider only buying certified organic catnip.

## 2. Elastic lines

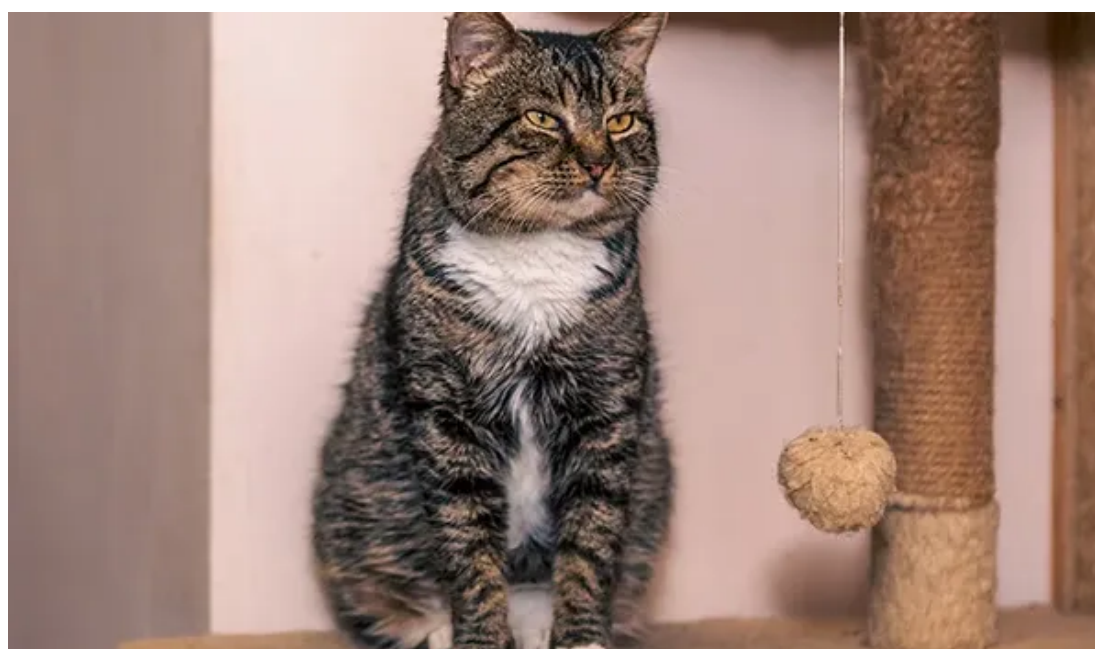


There are several types of cat toys that are attached by an elastic or stretchy lines or cords; they're all proven winners in giving your kitty some jumping exercise. They turn dangerous, however, if the line is chewed up and swallowed, which is not a difficult thing for cats to do.



Feline veterinarian Mardi Vargofcak-Apker says that it's not really that difficult for the elastic lines to become detached wands, and can get caught under the cat's tongue or looped around a rear tooth like a lasso, while the other end is swallowed. Experts say the lines can then behave like a curtain on a curtain rod by looping around the cat's intestines and constrict, which can cause serious lacerations similar to what a knife would do, and it could be deadly.

### 3. **Dangling toys**



Other toys can have parts that dangle involving strings or thread, and cats can get tangled, but the potential threat is what can happen later. Veterinarian Elisa Kleinman cautions that when a cat gets tangled up in strings, cords or even something as flimsy as thread dangling from a toy, it's not the tangling that's a hazard as much as the cat's attempts to free themselves.

If you've ever seen a cat desperately trying to wrestle with a roll of yarn they're all caught up in, their actions usually involve them wildly thrashing around, and that in itself puts them at risk as the line becomes even tighter. As thin as one strand of thread is, a dozen strands together can prove lethal. Sticking around to monitor your cat's activities with such toys may make all the difference if there should be a knotty problem.

### 4. **Sparkle balls**



Ah, the sparkle balls. If we were cats, we'd certainly pursue those, wouldn't we? Colorful and sparkly balls are made small to entice playful pets into a game of chase and catch. One thing leads to another in kitty world, and cats being what they are, they can easily swallow the little balls in a single gulp.

Being made out of fabric, faux fur, fibers and other equally absorbent material, cats can't always expel sparkly

balls if they should try to throw them up like grass or a hair ball, and therein lies the danger. As Luther warns, "In such cases, the toy moves farther down the intestinal track where it can cause serious internal damage and even cause obstruction, requiring surgical intervention." So again, either supervise when your cat plays with these or offer him a different toy.

## 5. Feathers



You may not think it, since birds have been pursued by cats from the dawn of creation, but feathers can be a choking hazard for cats when they end up eating them, as veterinarians can attest. There are additional problems with the commercial kinds of feathers made into cat toys, though. As [iheartcats.com](http://iheartcats.com) notes:

*"Although cats do catch and kill birds, they do not usually eat them and if they do, they leave the feathers. Feathers can cause blockages similar to a hairball and the chemicals in dyed craft feathers are not good for cats."*

In addition, the points at the ends of feathers are sharp and can either cause lacerations or get lodged in cats' mouths and throats. "Stuck" objects can cause discomfort and even pain for kitties and even be dangerous. Additionally, feathers in or on toys have usually been dyed or chemically treated, making them toxic or irritating to the GI tract.

## 6. Toys with bells



Toy manufacturers pull out all the stops when they make ever more imaginative trinkets for cats to play with, so to put bells on or in toys only seems fitting. But there's a drawback with these, as well, because cats love to chew on their prey, and when they "catch" the bell, it's just one more texture to nosh on.



As Pet MD observes, "curious cats might not be able to resist chewing and swallowing little bells, and while some of them might be small enough for a cat to pass, that's not always the case." If the pieces aren't small enough to pass naturally, the metal can break down in the cat's intestine and emit dangerous toxins.

## 7. **DIY toys**



Not many cat lovers have been able to resist putting together toys to catch the attention of their playful cats. It no doubt saves money, and cats often play with homemade toys as enthusiastically as those purchased in expensive pet stores. But Dr. Colleen Currigan, president of the American Association of Feline Practitioners, warns:

*"Hair ties, rubber bands and all types of string, from dental floss to butcher string, can be ingested with disastrous results. Currigan has heard of cats swallowing everything from a pop-up turkey thermometer to coins to pieces of rubber flip flops. She warns that anything 'chewable' — whether sanctioned or stolen — can be a risk factor for intestinal blockage if ingested."*

Even manufactured toys aren't guaranteed to be safe when cats use their teeth and claws to go after a toy they really like, and that's doubly true with do-it-yourself toy creations. One easy DIY cat toy you can make is an organic cotton baby sock filled with organic catnip and knotted or sewn closed. Simple, safe and enjoyable.

## **Cat Toys — Put the Toys Away**

Especially if you happen to notice that your cat has stopped chasing and is now chewing on their toy, it's time to intervene. That particular toy may have served its initial purpose and should now be retired if it's become a chew toy. It's anybody's guess how many weird things cats have swallowed, and most vets could tell you a story or two (or more) about what they've found on the job involving cat toys. If your cat may have eaten something he shouldn't have, Pet Health Network lists several symptoms to watch for:

- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal tenderness or pain
- Lack of appetite
- Straining to poop or constipation
- Lethargy

Prevention is always better than having to search out a cure. Keep small objects off the floors or otherwise accessible surfaces. Especially if you know your cat is a "getter," every thread, thumbtack and coin is fair game. If you have to, go through the rooms your cat has access to and make sure nothing is "gettable." If your cat has walked away from a toy and it's clear he's moved on to other amusements, get the toy and put it in a safe place where it can't be reached until it looks like your cat is again ready for some play time.

Keep in mind that clever cats often find ways to obtain what you think is out of sight and out of mind. Additionally, if you notice changes in behavior such as hissing, meowing loudly or struggling to get away uncharacteristically when you try to pick him up, there may be a problem.

It never hurts to visit your pet practitioner as soon as possible to be sure there's not a life-threatening problem. As always, if you're pretty sure your cat has swallowed something he shouldn't have, call your vet immediately. Beyond that, it never hurts to supervise or at least be in the same vicinity where your cat (or dog) is playing.

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