

HOW TO CHOOSE TOYS AND TREATS FOR YOUR CAT OR KITTEN

Most people who have pets enjoy playing with them and giving them toys. Unfortunately, unlike children's toys, there are no regulations to ensure that toys made for dogs and cats are safe. Many that are available in pet stores and supermarkets are unsafe. Many of the treats on the market are also unhealthy.

Check any toy you purchase for parts or pieces that could come off and be inhaled or swallowed. Googly eyes, little bells, small pieces of glued on felt, feathers and strings are some things to watch out for. Never purchase any toy that looks like it could come apart.

Whatever toys you choose, it's a good idea to rotate them. Putting a toy away and getting out a different one every few days can help avoid having the cat or kitten get bored with the same old thing. Keeping a cat occupied with a different toy each week may also prevent your cat from finding excitement knocking over wastebaskets or scratching the furniture. Popular toys include little plastic balls with bells inside, the balls that can be batted around inside a large, donut-shaped plastic tube, the long piece of fabric on a stick, and assorted cat nip filled animals. Be sure to throw away any toy that is getting frayed or broken, before threads or pieces are swallowed by the cat.

A very popular toy in recent years is the glitter ball, a soft ball with colorful "hair". The 2-inch larger size is pretty safe, but we have heard of veterinarians having to surgically remove glitter balls from cats' stomachs. Little stuffed mice are also popular. These are small enough to be swallowed or choked on. Be extra careful if you have a dog as well as a cat. Toys large enough that a cat can't choke on it or swallow it may still be unsafe for a dog that gets a hold of it instead.

Cats have small barbs on their tongues. The barbs point backwards. The function of these, aside from making the cat's tongue feel like sandpaper when it licks you, is to make grooming more effective. These little barbs also make it very difficult for a cat to remove string or fabric from its mouth. If a cat is playing with, or chewing on, one of these materials, and it gets too far back in the mouth, it will catch on these little barbs. The cat is not able to pull it back out again, and will reflexively start to swallow the string. Little by little your cat will be forced to swallow the whole thing.



The cat may choke on the string, or it may lodge in the intestinal tract and need to be surgically removed. In the worst cases, the string or thread becomes caught in the mouth, either by wrapping around the base of the tongue or a tooth, or because there is a needle on the end of the end of the thread that punctures the mouth or throat and lodges there. With one end of the string caught, when the intestines try to move the string along, it actually saws through the

intestine. This causes multiple holes in the intestine, which need to be sutured, and leads to massive infection in the abdominal cavity (peritonitis). Without emergency surgery, the cat will soon die.

Dragging or waving around a string is a favorite way to amuse a cat. There is no reason to stop this game altogether. You do need to use caution, though. Don't let your cat play with these items unsupervised, and put them away when you are done. Don't leave sewing, fishing or wrapping supplies out where cats can get into them. Be cautious of lace, rubber bands, yarn, shoelaces, dental floss, fishing line, ponytail scrunches, ribbons, etc. Even though the kitten and the ball of yarn is a favorite image, yarn and cats are not a good combination!

We get a lot of questions about the safety of catnip for cats. We have never read a report of a major problem with catnip, but no controlled studies have ever been done on its safety. Some cats get too wound up or aggressive after playing with catnip, and it should not be given to those cats. We usually advise giving catnip as an occasional treat and not on a daily basis, in case it can cause problems with frequent or long-term use.

Cats are seldom as interested in treats as dogs are, but some cats do enjoy a snack here and there. Unfortunately, most cat treats are not very healthy. They tend to be loaded with salt, artificial flavors and artificial colors. They are also a long way from being complete and balanced nutrition.

Because cats are so small, usually around ten pounds in weight, it doesn't take very many Pounce treats to overdo it. The rule of thumb is not to give a cat more than 2 of these sorts of treats per day, and we would rather young kittens don't get any at all. Like potato chips or ice cream in people, a small amount once in a while is fine, but if those food items are a major portion of your diet, you probably aren't getting very good nutrition. Most cats only need 1/4 to 1/3 of a cup of food twice daily. It doesn't take many treats before they are getting too much junk food.

Children love to give treats to their pets and are often the guilty parties when pets get too many of them. Encourage your kids to play with their pets instead. It's much healthier to get more exercise and fewer snacks!

Check treat labels in the stores carefully, and try to avoid the ones with the most salt, fat and artificial ingredients. (The same is true for any dry cat food - if the nuggets come in different colors it's because they've been sprayed with food coloring. Avoid these foods. Your cat doesn't need food coloring - cats are color blind!)

As always, please call us if you have any questions or problems in regard to toys and treats for your pet. Choose carefully, and hopefully you will have many years of playtime together!

