

Behavior FAQ: Repetitive Behaviors

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Tail chasing, licking, over-grooming and chasing shadows or lights. Behaviorists call these behaviors stereotypies; veterinarians prefer the term “compulsive disorders.” These are behaviors an animal does over and over again in an identical pattern. A familiar example is animals confined in a zoo who pace back and forth in their pens. Often, these enclosures are too small and the animals don’t have enough to do.

Stereotypies in pets can develop for a variety of reasons. **This is one problem for which you should absolutely have your cat thoroughly evaluated by your veterinarian, and perhaps by a veterinary neurologist, dermatologist, ophthalmologist or specialist in internal medicine.** Your pet may have a skin infection, a vision problem or something wrong with his nervous system.

Stereotypies can also develop for behavioral reasons. A common cause is stress or conflict. Perhaps your cat is being harassed or bullied by another pet. Maybe your cat has recently joined your family and is stressed from trying to adapt to her new living situation. Moving to a new house can also be a stressor that can trigger a stereotypy, as can an unpredictable lifestyle.

Or, like confined animals in a zoo, these behaviors can also develop if your cat’s environment and lifestyle aren’t meeting his behavioral needs. Perhaps your cat is left alone a lot or doesn’t have enough to do to occupy his time. You can take steps to enrich your cat’s environment.

Once medical problems are ruled out, often these problems can be successfully treated using a combination of behavior modification and drug therapy. They are not simple problems, and they frequently require consultation with your veterinarian and/or an experienced and knowledgeable behavior consultant.

FIND A BEHAVIOR CONSULTANT TO HELP

Many problems are easily corrected through modification training, particularly if problems are addressed early. Find an animal behavior consultant in your area through one of the following Web sites: [American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](http://www.acvb.org), [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](http://www.internationalassociationofanimalbehaviorconsultants.com) or [Animal Behavior Society](http://www.animalbehavioristsociety.com). Learn more by reading “Guidelines for Choosing a Trainer or Behavior Consultant.”