

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 that 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 dog or 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 another pet is harassing or bullying your pet. Maybe your pet has just 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 even consistent and unpredictable noises that your pet is afraid of.

Or, like confined animals in a zoo, these behaviors can also develop if your pet’s environment and lifestyle aren’t meeting his behavioral needs. Perhaps your dog is left alone a lot or doesn’t have enough to do to occupy his time. If you believe your dog might be displaying repetitive behaviors because he is confined or left alone for long hours with nothing to do, take steps to improve the quality of his environment.

Behavioral researchers have found a strong genetic component to some of these behaviors, such as tail chasing in bull terriers. Sometimes these behaviors can persist even after the event that started them goes away. For example, perhaps your dog begins licking her paw excessively because she is afraid of the frequent summer thunderstorms.

Even when the thunderstorm season ends, the behaviors can persist if the hair pulling and licking have become the pet’s preferred way of coping with stress. These problems can be quite complex and often require both behavior modification as well as medication prescribed by a veterinarian to resolve.

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.iaaap.org) or [Animal Behavior Society](http://www.abn.org). Learn more by reading “Guidelines for Choosing a Trainer or Behavior Consultant.”