



**KATHY KOPELLIS McLEOD** The dog behaviour consultant helps us understand our canine companions

# STOP PETS EATING STRANGE OBJECTS

*Dogs have been found to sniff out various non-food items around the house and chew on them, but the real danger is if your pet actually tries to ingest these objects*

**D**oes your dog eat things it shouldn't? A lot of dogs ingest foreign objects such as rocks, plastic, paper, socks, etc. The term used to describe this behaviour is pica. This is undesirable behaviour in general, but the biggest concern is the serious health risk that ingestion of non-food items places on your pet.

Some dogs have become so obsessed with eating rocks, socks and toys that they have blocked their intestinal tracts and needed surgery.

The reasons for pica are not well understood.

**Here are some possible causes, plus some prevention and treatment tips:**

## Medical

There may be medical reasons that should be ruled out through a veterinary examination.

In the absence of any medical issues, there are a number of behavioural reasons for pica.

## Learnt behaviour

There is a learnt component to pica, which can be caused as a result of how an owner responds when their dogs pick up foreign items.

Rushing towards a dog, yelling and

reaching for the item can escalate some dog's attempts to keep the object. If you've ever caught your dog in the act of eating cat faeces, you'll know exactly how quickly they scoff down their "treat" to avoid losing this prized possession.

This strong interest in the object convinces the dog to hold on to it with even more determination. As this happens, the dangerous item slips further back in the dog's mouth until it's finally swallowed. Many dogs can have items removed from their mouth without developing pica.

## Attention seeking

It won't take too many incidents before an attention-driven dog learns that picking up a non-food item will make you react.

Ensure you set aside time to spend with your dog and acknowledge good manners so that they don't resort to bad behaviour to gain your attention.

## Boredom

Boredom or insufficient exercise for long periods of time without companionship can heighten your dog's interest in chewing non-food items.

A dog with little to do in its day will

explore their environment and seek out items that might provide some mental stimulation.

## Unintentional

Dogs explore with their mouths. Some hold and chew objects only to reject them while others will follow through and eat them.

Sometimes these two functions are so closely connected that the dog ends up partially ingesting something that it originally intended only to explore and release.

## Food related

Feeding smaller amounts more often and adding fibre to your dog's diet will promote a feeling of fullness and may decrease the unwanted behaviour. It is advisable to check with your vet before changing your dog's diet if you have any concerns.

Offer acceptable objects, such as interactive toys, rawhide chews or fresh meaty bones.

There are also taste aversion products that aim to deter your dog from the foreign objects, but they do not address the underlying cause.

Seek assistance from your vet to



PICTURES: ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/GLOBALP; STPHILLIPS

ensure you use these products safely and monitor your dog's progress because some products aren't as effective as others.

Clean your backyard daily to minimise your dog's opportunity to eat things they shouldn't.

If you suspect that anxiety or frustration is the reason for your dog's pica habit, consider behaviour modification techniques and training methods that incorporate positive reinforcement.

Have an interesting array of toys and introduce different ones over the coming days to keep their interest.

Initially remove foreign objects from areas around the house that your dog could reach while you're working on this problem. This can be easier said than done, but it is worth doing your very best to reduce access to problem items.

Seek professional advice immediately if you don't see any improvement.

Visit [www.kathysdogtraining.com.au](http://www.kathysdogtraining.com.au) for further information about dog behaviour and training and while you're there, sign up to receive some free dog training tips. Check out Kathy's newly released dates for her popular monthly Intensive Dog Workshop designed for reactive dogs and catch up on Kathy's previous articles in The Sunday Times.

