

# Behavior: That Thing Tabby Does

Tabby is a trip. She snuggles, she purrs, and then she . . . leaves dead animals on your doorstep. She also coughs up hairballs, chews through wool sweaters, incessantly pulls out her own hair, and will only drink water in very particular ways. Although you might wish you could train Tabby to live in your house, you just might need to adjust to life in Tabby's house.

## DEAD ANIMAL DILEMMA

There's nothing quite like being greeted with a mangled bird on your doorstep when you go to get the paper in the morning. What is it with cats and killing? Are they trying to impress you?

Not at all, says Dr. Wayne Hunthausen of the Westwood Animal Hospital in Westwood, Kansas. "What you're seeing is predatory behavior," explains Hunthausen. "Cats will show partial segments of predatory behavior that occur out of context. Normally a cat would go out and hunt, bringing food back for the kittens. You're seeing just a part of that behavior." After she acts out her natural instincts, your cat goes back to being tame Tabby in her domesticated lifestyle. So don't worry, according to Hunthausen. "The cat isn't thinking she's bringing you food to make you happy." A relief, since toast and coffee, not a mangled animal, is more likely to be your breakfast of champions.

## WHY WOOL?

Obsessively chewing anything wool, Tabby has destroyed more sweaters, afghans, and upholstery than you like to remember. The motive behind this mysterious (to us) behavior will either be physical or psychological, depending on the cat, and in either case you should visit your veterinarian to get to the bottom of it.

Physically, Tabby may simply need more roughage in her diet, and wool chewing is the most available (though we can't imagine tasty) way to fulfill her need. Some pet stores sell small planters of roughage-rich herbs that will entice a cat more than your favorite red sweater. Combined with a high-fiber diet, the planters may be a dream come true when it comes to controlling Tabby's wool-mania. But you should first see your veterinarian and get an official opinion about changing Tabby's diet.

knows for sure what lies behind this drive.

One explanation focuses on normal - but out of control - behavior for the cat. For example, eating fur is a normal activity when a cat catches an animal for dinner.

But a cat that eats the fur - and only the fur - of her prey is exhibiting obsessive behavior. Cat obsessions often spring from exposure to stress. Your veterinarian can make a diagnosis and recommend treatment.



## BALDIE THE WONDER CAT

Tabby may prefer chewing on herself to chewing on wool - and you can't get her to stop. Stress, fleas, or an underlying allergy could all be the cause of Tabby's constant licking, overgrooming, or pulling out her own fur. If your veterinarian rules out a physical condition (fleas, allergies), the cause of the problem is likely a compulsive disorder brought about by stress. Cats, as you well know, can be pretty picky when it comes to their preferences, and the addition of another animal or person to the house, a change in the environment, or a traumatic incident can all start a cat along the path to self-destruction.

But how to best bust Tabby's balding behavior? "Above all, make sure you don't punish the cat," admonishes Hunthausen. "You don't want to add any more stress to the environment. Once you've ruled out medical problems, the key to stopping unwanted behavior is to not reinforce it . . . If you catch your cat pulling out her hair, make an unusual noise that interrupts the behavior - click a clicker, blow a whistle - but ignore your cat while doing it. Avoid eye contact while the cat reorients herself to her surroundings, then take the cat's mind off it. Engage in vigorous play and reinforce the nonlicking behavior." Hunthausen also recommends increasing the amount of play and exercise Tabby receives during the day.

If the behavior is caused by an environmental stressor, try removing the stress and creating a quiet area for the cat. Give her lots of quality time, special treats, and anything to make her feel wanted and secure. If love and attention don't do the trick, medication can be used as a last resort. But, as always, you'll need to first see your veterinarian.

A side result of Tabby's self-balding is hairballs. Hairballs are generally just a problem for the owner, who takes on the task of cleaning them up. The frequency of hairballs depends on the cat, the cat's length of hair, and whom she



Psychologically, if the root of the problem lies in Tabby's thinker, your cat may be obsessed. Unfortunately, no one quite

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is grooming besides herself. Keep an eye on her (to ensure she's not grooming everything that walks), and brush her frequently to reduce the amount of hair she ingests. Medication can be used if necessary.

### EEK! I'M MELTING!

The Wicked Witch of the East isn't the only one who disdains water. Cats are notorious for their aversion to getting wet. But cat owners who consciously work to acclimate their kittens to water can teach a cat to enjoy bathing - and even swimming - as an adult. If Tabby is older, however, and has never been exposed to water, you will probably not be able to change her mind about it.

Cats can also be frustratingly peculiar about their drinking habits. Some will drink only from a certain dish, some cats

insist upon running water, and some will only drink by dipping a paw into water and then licking it off. Drinking preferences, like their preferences for being wet, are set at an early age. Cats can be very sensitive to the size and shape of a drinking vessel, and some will only drink cool, running water (hence the attraction to a toilet basin or a slow drip from the faucet). Whatever Tabby's preferences, you need to ensure that she gets enough water, especially if she eats dry food. While canned food contains up to 74 percent water and can be your finicky feline's main thirst quencher, dry food contains only 10 percent water. Whatever food you are feeding Tabby, a separate, clean source of water should be available to her at all times. And however strange your cat's drinking habits may seem to you, don't discourage them. Let her drink water in whatever way, shape, or form she prefers

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[www.mobilespca.org](http://www.mobilespca.org) or email the Mobile SPCA  
at [spca@mobilespca.org](mailto:spca@mobilespca.org)



## Mobile SPCA

620 Zeigler Circle West  
Mobile, AL 36608

**633-3531**

[spca@mobilespca.org](mailto:spca@mobilespca.org)



*Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.*

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