



Cat Vet Questions

Our family cat had a history of bad breath and later in life had to have several teeth extracted. I've since left home and have moved into my unit and am about to get a beautiful Burmese kitten around Christmas. What should I do during my kitten's upbringing and adult life to ensure her teeth stay healthy? Should I get her used to brushing her teeth at an early age?

There are a number of things you can do to help your cat's dental health, and starting early is a great idea as we all know cats develop their own opinions on things pretty soon in life! One of the best things is providing food in their diet they can chew on. There are certain types of dry food designed to keep teeth and gums healthy, plus providing them with strips of raw meat (for human consumption) or even whole raw chicken wings (given under supervision) a few times a week is good for their teeth and provides them with a healthy treat.

Brushing the teeth each night (or as often as practical), is beneficial to keep gums and teeth healthy. There are specially designed toothpastes (which don't froth and have flavours like chicken) and brushes to make it easier. Start off slowly and get your kitten used to you playing with their mouth before gently introducing the brushing. However, some cats just never seem to get used to having their teeth brushed and alternatives like specially formulated gels that you only need to apply a drop of to cat's gums are also helpful.

Each time your cat is checked by the vet (usually annually), they should check the teeth to ensure all is well. Some cats seem destined for more problems with their teeth than others, often due to a combination of factors such as early infection with Calicivirus, one of the 'flu' viruses, or hereditary factors. Having a prophylactic scale and polish (under general anaesthetic), similar to human dentistry, is something many cats will need every so often to help prevent disease getting to the stage where teeth need to be removed. Sometimes no matter what you do, extractions may still become necessary, but cats adapt extremely well to having few or even no teeth!!



Dog & small animal Vet Questions

My youngest son has recently "inherited" a rabbit from a well-meaning relative. We have it outside in a hutch and it gets pellets and vegies each day and my son is responsible for his care and feeding. We've had the bunny for just over a month or so but he eats his own poo. I've witnessed this with my son. Is there something wrong or missing in its diet that would make it do this, or is there a medical problem that we need to check with our vet? And how often should we take a rabbit to the vet for check-ups?

The name of the phenomenon you are witnessing is coprophagy, which is a fancy way of saying stool-eating. Coprophagy is seen in rabbits, most rodents and a variety of other animals. It is a normal behaviour. In fact, it is an important part of your rabbit's diet. Normally the stools that the rabbit eats are a special type of stool (called "cecotropes") that is not made up of waste material but rather is rich in vitamin B, vitamin K and other nutrients, and also contains some bacteria that help in the digestive process. The production of cecotropes is actually a helpful thing that allows the rabbit to make the most out of the food it eats and helps them to survive in different habitats as well as in periods during which no food is available.

Melissa Catt BVSc
Paddington Cat Hospital

Melissa graduated from the University of Sydney in 1990. She worked in a private small animal practice in Adelaide for two years and then in England for a further two years. Melissa continued in private practice on her return to Sydney before starting Paddington Cat Hospital with her husband, Randolph Baral in 1997. Melissa is interested in all aspects of feline medicine and has a particular liking for soft tissue surgery. Of course, Melissa was nominatively destined for feline medicine.

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My 4 year-old Persian, Geanie, sometimes drags her bottom over the carpet like she's scooting along like she's scratching it. A friend suggested it's like dogs with worms but I'm pretty vigilant with keeping her worming medication up to date. In February her annual vaccination is due. Should we change the worming medication? She gets groomed regularly and I've noticed that sometimes she has remnants of faeces around her bottom. Could this also be due to worms?

A few factors can lead to scooting the bottom along the ground, a rather unpleasant thing for both the cat and the owner! Certainly infection with tapeworm can cause itchiness in this area, so ensure the worming tablets you are using cover this type of worm. It is also important to make sure you know how much she weighs, if the dose of wormer is insufficient she may still be infected. Normally if there is significant infection with tapeworm you will see segments around the anus or on the faeces-they are yellowish white and look a bit like grains of rice. Tapeworm infection is not usually associated with soft faeces. Having faecal remnants caught in the area can also cause irritation, so perhaps clipping her around the bottom would be a good idea. If the faeces are soft, this should perhaps be looked into and a modification in her diet may be in order. If all this is fine, then the small sacs near the anus (the 'anal glands') may be a problem for her, as these can sometimes become full and irritated or even infected, and this would need to be checked by your vet.

Our cat had a litter of kittens last Summer. She's since been de-sexed but has a developed this weird habit of taking socks and undies from the stack of clean washing, drawers and other places and hiding them behind the lounge chairs, under our beds, behind the dresser and behind the TV cabinet. At times when I've observed her she makes a deep growling noise while she's carrying these around. Mostly she does this at night or when we're away from the house-at least that's the times we think she predominantly does this. Is this normal or is there some kind of problem we should get checked out?

This is very unusual behaviour in a desexed queen, and rarely seen in practice. It is typical nesting behaviour which is usually manifested from a few days before she gives birth. Rarely, if an animal is spayed during a particular phase of her reproductive cycle (dioestrous) she may have increased progesterone levels leading to some residual nesting behaviour, but it will probably reduce over time. It may be worth considering having the socks and undies put away so she doesn't have access to them in the meantime. If the behaviour continues, or if she shows any signs of being unwell, then a check over by your vet is a good idea.

Dr Katherine Briscoe
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Dr Katherine Briscoe graduated from the University of Sydney in 2004 with first class honours and the University Medal. She grew up in Sydney and has always had a keen interest in animals. She is currently working at Gladesville Veterinary Hospital.

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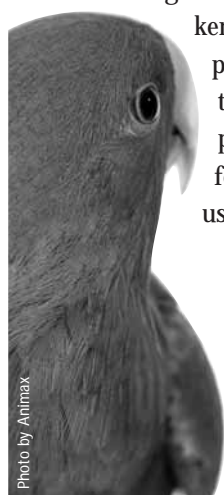
In terms of the general health of your rabbit, it sounds as though the diet you are providing is adequate, providing you are feeding a good quality pelleted food. One thing you must be careful of when feeding pellets is that you do not overfeed the rabbit, as this may cause obesity. I suggest you check with your vet to make sure that the pelleted food you have chosen is adequate, and that you are not feeding too much. It is also recommended that you feed a variety of greens (for example broccoli, alfalfa sprouts, clover, parsley, lettuce and cabbage) to help prevent nutritional imbalances-yet these should be avoidable if you are feeding a good quality pellet.

Other vegetables are best given as treats rather than as a major part of the diet. As an aside, rabbits should always be provided with water, especially on hot days as they cannot survive for long periods without water. Finally, it is recommended that, like all other pets, you take your rabbit to the vet at least once a year for a check-up. Rabbits can be vaccinated against Rabbit calicivirus (a disease that can kill rabbits) and this requires an annual booster.

Our Boxer, Sam, is getting on in years and has always been a very active dog. Our vet suggested that as he slows down he really only needs a little exercise so we've cut back two walks to just one in the morning. He has always chewed his feet—mostly his back feet. What I mean by chewing is that he puts his foot into his mouth and licks and sucks on it. We think the foot chewing has escalated since his activity has decreased. He's got white 'socks' so we can really notice his back feet looking very pink and almost raw. Sometimes he just lounges on the carpet in front of the TV and lolls his feet around his mouth for ages. We try to distract him but I think he's doing it during the day while unsupervised. Is there anything you can recommend putting on his feet to stop the licking and sucking? Apart from some stiffness, he has no problem getting around and is in good health for an old guy.

Wow, what a can of worms you have opened here! There are many things (both medical and behavioural) that could be causing Sam to chew at his feet. If he's used to getting more than one walk a day, then the extra time in the day could be being devoted to foot-chewing, and I think that a reduction in his activity could be contributing to the problem. However, there are also some other problems that may be occurring in Sam. Firstly, he may have some type of allergy that is making him itchy, and therefore he is licking at his feet.

He could also have an infection, either fungal (often caused by the organism *Malassezia pachydermatis*) or bacterial, and this possibility should be investigated before we start to use any lotions on the feet. If Sam has been licking and chewing at his feet for some time, and especially if the feet are looking red and sore, then there is every possibility that he has an infection of the skin in this area. The simple answer to your question is yes, there is an ointment you can put on the feet to deter licking. It is a product similar to the bittering agent used to stop humans from biting their nails. The trouble with using this ointment on infected or broken skin is that it can be irritating, and therefore can make the problem worse rather than better. My recommendation would be to take Sam to your vet to ensure there are no underlying medical problems causing him to chew his feet (often this requires only a few simple and inexpensive tests) and if not, then to try him using a bittering agent on the feet to see if this assists the problem.



Bird Vet Questions

My pet cockatiel lays a lot of eggs. She used to lay just a few in spring but now she is still laying them in January. She has become aggressive and some of the eggs are soft. I want her to not lay, or at least not as often, as it seems to be wearing her out and she won't let me play with her.

It is normal for female birds to lay occasional clutches of eggs each year or two. Chronic egg laying occurs when a female bird lays more than the normal number of eggs (this is more than 7 eggs in most species) or, more commonly, has repeated clutches of eggs, especially in the absence of a mate.

It is often caused by a failure of the bird's hormones to switch off egg laying when it's inappropriate for it to be doing so. This may be due to inappropriate daylength, stimulation caused by a perceived/real partner or mate - such as their owner or objects in the cage (eg cuddly toys), the presence and shredding of nesting material (eg paper), high fat diets, seasonal changes and diseases associated with the reproductive organs

Chronic egg laying stresses your bird. The bird may have low calcium. This can lead to egg-binding, uterine problems, seizures and even death.

To correct the problem your cockatiel needs to be on a nutritionally balanced low fat (no sunflower seeds) diet of commercial pellets and fresh foods. Do not remove eggs as they are laid, as this can actually encourage the bird to lay more eggs. Leave the eggs in the cage for 2 weeks. Decrease the number of hours the bird is exposed to sunlight. The cage location may also be changed and be sure to remove any nestboxes or nesting material.

Finally you may need to obtain a mate for the bird and allow the bird to go through a full breeding cycle. This is often the most effective treatment. Medical therapy from an avian veterinarian may be needed if this does not succeed. In some cases surgery to remove the uterus may be necessary. Behavioural consults may also help as you, the owner, can gain an understanding of your bird's reason for chronic egg laying, and take steps to prevent it.

Nearly a year ago we got a "rescue dog" who is approximately 5 years old and a Cocker Spaniel. She's got glorious long ears but hates having them touched and seems overly sensitive to any attempts to clean them. We have very little idea of her history and I've never had a dog with floppy ears before. She'll never snap-just yelps, whines and tries to wriggle free during grooming. We've had to instruct visitors not to touch her ears as her reaction can be quite alarming. She sometimes will jump straight up from a lie down and shake her head and ears. She had a full check-up from a vet before we got her. Could there be an infection or past problem that may have been overlooked?

Cocker spaniels do have lovely long ears, don't they? The problem is they can also cause no end of trouble, ear infections being just the start! As you may be aware, the dog's ear canal is an L-shaped structure with a vertical segment running down the side of the dog's face, and the horizontal segment moving centrally into the dog's head. The trouble for dog's like Cocker spaniels is that because the pinna (the ear flap) is so floppy, it allows moisture to become trapped in the ear canals and therefore predisposes these breeds to ear infections.

In your dog's case, she may simply have a dislike of people touching her ears (each dog is an individual and have their own special needs), and given that we do not know a lot about her history, she may have had trouble with her ears in the past that has made her wary of people touching her ears, but she may also have a medical problem that needs to be attended to. The fact that she seems bothered by her ears (indicated by the fact that she will jump up and shake her head and ears) suggests that there may be some infection present. Otitis externa (external ear infections, as distinct from middle ear infections) is a complex disease. There are many factors (such as long floppy ears) that predispose dogs to ear infections, and there are many organisms that can be present in the infection (bacteria, yeasts and parasites to name a few). These ear infections can also become complicated if the infection involves the middle ear or affects the tympanic membrane. It is therefore best if you have your dog's ears examined to ensure there is no infection present. If there is, then depending on how severe the infection is, she may need to have her ears cleaned, or it may simply require an ointment that needs to be instilled into the ear. Hopefully she will have a simple ear infection that is easy to treat and does not cause her (or you!) too much trouble.

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Alex graduated from the University of Sydney in 1991. He achieved Membership of the Avian Health Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Scientists in 1996. In November 1996 he opened the first and only Sydney all bird and exotic pet practice. The Clinic moved to 1 Hunter St Waterloo in 2003 and sees approximately 80% birds, and 20% fish, reptiles and other exotic pets. Alex is the current president of the Australian Veterinary Association Avian Group.



My 2 year old budgie has spiky feathers on its head and seems to be very itchy. I've tried mite spray but it doesn't seem to have worked. There is a lot of feather fluff in his cage. I think I remember it happening before. Should I be concerned?

Spiky feathers on the head of any bird, including your mature budgie, are often a sign of moulting. Moulting is when your bird replaces the old feathers with new feathers. You will notice new waxy-like spikes on the head and, if you look closely at the body and wings, you will see new feathers here too. The waxy spikes are the cover over the new feathers. During the moult, on the ground of the cage you will see waxy small white material and you may see many feathers around. Because your bird has to open all these new feathers, they will seem to be very itchy while in fact they are just picking out the old feathers and opening up the new ones. Most birds in Sydney have their main moult in January-February for 6-8 weeks and a smaller moult in July. They will change nearly every feather on their body.

Problems can occur during the moult. It takes a lot of energy and nutrition to change all these feathers. If your bird is not on a nutritionally balanced diet of pellets, a small amount of seed and fresh food and vegetables, it can be susceptible to other diseases during this time. Also if your budgie has any other mild problems or diseases they may become a major problem during the moult. For this reason it is usual to have an annual checkover with a qualified avian veterinarian to test for other diseases prior to the moult. If your bird seems overly quiet or unwell during the moult it is also important that your bird is checked by a veterinarian.

In some cases your bird may be feather-picking or abnormally losing feathers and not moulting. This may be due to serious diseases or major behavioural problems. If you are not sure, consult your avian veterinarian to distinguish between natural moulting and problem feather-picking and disease.

Send your question to one of our Vets by emailing critters@urbananimal.net