



# CatWatch

Expert information on medicine, behavior and health from a world leader in veterinary medicine



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## IN THE NEWS ...

### Could Our Furniture be Making our Cats Sick?

A 2017 study from Stockholm University, published in the journal *Environmental Science & Technology*, suggests that our houses may be making our cats sick.

The study showed that chemicals in electronics and furniture can become dust that adversely affects health. Flame retardant compounds, added to products like furniture, eventually break down to dust. This study found these compounds in higher levels in the blood of cats with hyperthyroidism compared to healthy cats in the same household.

"Cats in the study spent the majority of their time indoors and therefore air and dust in the home is expected to contribute more than the outdoor environment," says Jana Weiss from Stockholm University's department of Environmental Science and Analytical Chemistry. "The brominated flame retardants that have been measured in cats are known endocrine disruptors."

Endocrine disruptors can cause cancer and hormonal problems. ♦

## Kidney Failure is a Progressive Disease

*Cats are masters at hiding illnesses, but the sooner renal problems are diagnosed, the better*

One of the earliest and most telltale signs of kidney disease is an unusually wet litter box, which corresponds with increased urination. Kidney failure is a leading cause of death in domestic cats. Generally, this is from chronic kidney failure, but acute kidney failure can be fatal as well.

The kidneys filter out toxins, drug metabolites, and waste materials from the blood via the production of urine.

The buildup of toxins in the blood and body may manifest as neurologic signs, vomiting, depression, and even seizures and death,

explains Joseph J. Wakshlag, DVM, Ph.D., Cornell Associate Professor, Section of Clinical Nutrition, Section Chief, and a diplomate in the American College of Veterinary Nutrition.

While filtering out the "bad" substances, the kidneys also work to retain



A depressed cat is lethargic, may hide, and often doesn't groom herself.

© Canine Zuhairou / iStockphoto.com

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## How to Handle a Finicky Eater

*A healthy cat who won't eat may be seeking variety in her diet — even warming her food may help*

As in all things, cats can be particular about their food. "It seems to be a feline attribute," says Katherine Houpt, VMD, Ph.D., ACVB, Cornell University Professor of Behavior Medicine, *emeritus*. Some cats are just naturally picky and like to have variety in their diet, but changes in eating habits can also be a sign of stress or major illness. "If a cat who was an eager eater becomes finicky then a trip to the veterinarian is warranted — sooner rather than later," says Dr. Houpt.

**Enticing Foods.** For a cat who will eat one day and then turns up its nose the next,

rotating foods can be the solution. "You will become a good customer of all those tiny, expensive cans of cat food," comments Dr. Houpt. "Do not stock up on one flavor; for example feed salmon on Monday, turkey on Tuesday, beef on Wednesday." Adding bits of meat can also make mealtime more exciting for a picky kitty.

Another easy way to entice cats to eat is to heat up their food a little. Sick cats may have an impaired sense of smell, which makes them less interested in food. Heating up the food strengthens the aroma, which is often enough to inspire the cat to eat.

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# CatWatch

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## SHORT TAKES

### Let's Snuggle

The Morris Animal Foundation recently wrote that a cat's best defense against cancer may be snuggling with her owner.

When you snuggle with your cat, note any lumps or bumps you feel as you pet her. Like a woman's monthly breast self examination, this can be a good tool for the early detection of cancer. Unusual and/or growing lumps should be reported to your veterinarian immediately.

Most lumps are benign and can be easily removed if necessary, but you may find mast cell tumors, squamous cell carcinomas, and mammary tumors while petting your cat. Injection site sarcomas (ISS), which are malignant cancers triggered by injections of material under the skin, are another possibility, although the incidence of ISS is rare.

### Cat Videos Improve Your Outlook

If you enjoy watching cat videos online, you're not alone. Researchers from Indiana University Media School surveyed almost 7,000 people and found that these short takes boost moods. Published in *Computers in Human Behavior*, the study showed that more than two million cat videos were posted on YouTube in 2014 with almost 26 billion views. Cat videos had more views per video than any other category on YouTube.

Indiana University Assistant Professor and lead researcher Jessica Gail Myrick says, "We have all watched a cat video on-



The positive effects of  
watching a cat video have  
been documented in a study.



Snuggling with your cat has many benefits for both you and your cat.

line, but there is really little empirical work done on why so many of us do this, or what effects it might have on us."

Of the participants in the study, 36 percent described themselves as a cat person, while about 60 percent said they liked both cats and dogs. They reported that:

- ◆ They were more energetic after watching cat videos.
- ◆ They had fewer negative emotions, such as anxiety, annoyance, and sadness.
- ◆ They often viewed internet cats at work or while studying.
- ◆ The pleasure they got from viewing the videos outweighed any guilt about procrastinating.
- ◆ About 25 percent of the videos were ones they sought, while 75 percent were happened upon.

"The emotional payoff may actually help people take on tough tasks afterward," says Myrick. The results suggest that future work could explore how online cat videos might be used as a form of low-cost therapy, she said. ◆



# Hairballs are Normal for Cats

*Long-haired cats are especially prone, but you can minimize the problem with a little TLC*

Every cat lover can tell you tales of waking from a deep sleep to the sound of their cat retching up a hairball or stepping on a hairball as they get up in the morning. Not pleasant experiences!

Hairballs, also known as trichobezoars, are a fact of life for most cat fanciers. This is especially true if you have a long-haired cat, such as a Persian or domestic long-hair, but even domestic short hairs can suffer from hairballs. Luckily most hairballs are a minor problem.

Cats are prone to hairballs for two reasons. First, their tongues are rough with papillae that slant backwards. Second, cats are known for their fastidious grooming. As your cat grooms, any loose hairs are caught up by that rough tongue and sent on down the esophagus into the stomach.

Hair is not very digestible, so the hair collected there either passes out in the feces or builds up into a size that irritates your cat's stomach and is then vomited up. The characteristic sausage shape comes from the passage out via the esophagus as the hair gets compressed.

You may even mistake a hairball for feces at first and think that your cat has a litterbox problem. A close inspection will show the difference.

Most of the time, the amount of hair swallowed during your cat's daily grooming is small and the hairs simply pass on through the digestive tract. There are situations, however, in which a large amount of hair may get swallowed at one time. These times include periods of heavy shedding, after a bath, or if something has been spilled on her coat. Stressed cats and cats with skin problems may do extra grooming and build up hair accumulations as well.

**An Ounce of Prevention.** As always, prevention is better than having to treat this problem. You can help minimize the amount of hair your cat consumes by regular grooming. Use a brush like a slicker brush (with short metal prongs) that mimics your cat's tongue. Be sure to brush your cat all over, including areas behind her ears and in her armpits where



Grooming your cat is an excellent way to reduce hairballs.

mats often form. You may need to snip those mats out very carefully with scissors. Be very careful with the shears. It's extremely easy to grab your cat's skin when you're cutting. Brush all the way down the sides — not just the back. Lift the hair to be sure you get the undercoat and don't just skim over the top. Do the stomach area too. Be sure to do a thorough grooming to remove all loose hair both before and after a bath.

If your cat resists grooming or has built-up matted areas you may need to have her shaved. Some groomers will do this, or you can do it yourself if you have clippers, but if your cat resists violently the best solution may be to have her tranquilized and shaved at your veterinary clinic.

There are special diets that can help with cats who have chronic and recurrent hairball problems. These diets contain added indigestible fiber to help push the hair through the gastrointestinal tract. You can provide some natural fiber by giving your cat access to grass to chew on. You can purchase or make special planter setups for indoor "cat grass." Most cats enjoy those.

Make sure your cat has lots of fresh water available at all times. Plenty of fluid can help move hair along.

**Supplements.** There are special hairball supplements that include a lubricant to

*(continued on bottom of page 5)*

Growing "cat grass" will help your cat naturally move hair along her digestive tract.



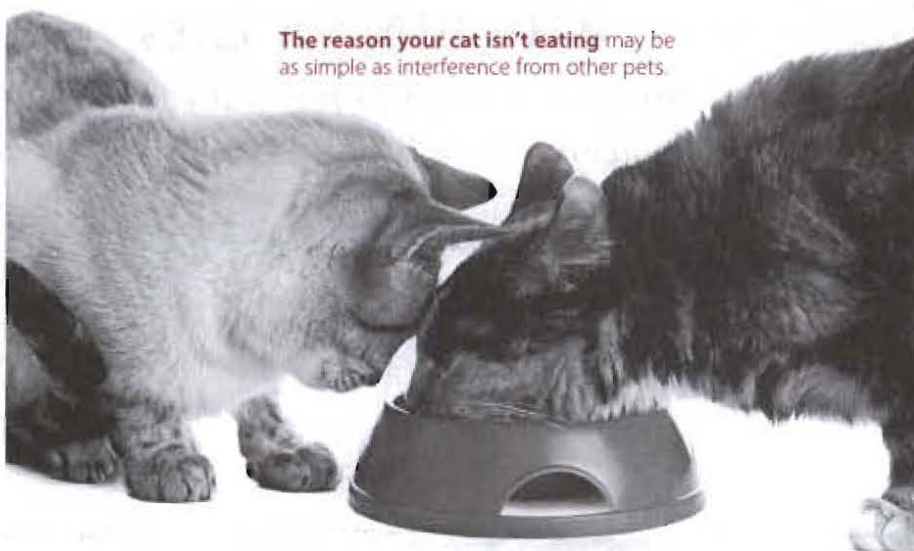


**FINICKY EATER**...*(continued from cover)*

**Kidney Disease.** "Cats with kidney disease are very likely to become finicky and must be encouraged," says Dr. Houpt. Cats in kidney failure are often less enthusiastic about their meals, either due to feeling ill or not liking the restricted-protein diet. "Chicken is a meat that cats seem to like even when they are feeling sick so that is my standby," says Dr. Houpt. "My teenage cat with kidney disease shares a rotisserie chicken with the rest of us." (See our article on page 1.)

Therapeutic diets for kidney disease are low in protein, sodium, and phosphorous, and high in fiber, antioxidants, and water-soluble vitamins. Many cats do not find these diets as palatable as regular high-protein diets. If putting a cat on a therapeutic diet for kidney disease, make the transition gradually and work with your veterinarian to determine a formula that will work for your cat. Try to select a flavor that your cat enjoys, and heat it up if necessary. Homemade meals are another option, but be sure to consult a veterinary nutritionist to make sure that you are preparing a balanced diet that meets all of your cat's needs.

**Feline Hepatic Lipidosis.** "Fat cats who stop eating are in particular danger when they begin to accumulate fat in their liver tissue," says Dr. Houpt. Hepatic lipidosis, commonly referred to as "fatty liver," is usually secondary to another health problem, such as kidney disease, diabetes, liver disease,



The reason your cat isn't eating may be as simple as interference from other pets.

pancreatitis, or hyperthyroidism. Illness causes the cat to stop eating, and the lack of incoming nutrients leads the body to break down its fat stores for energy. This causes large quantities of fats to accumulate in the liver, which prevents the liver from working properly.

As the liver starts to fail, the cat becomes even less interested in eating, which only worsens the situation. Cats who are not seen and treated quickly can go into liver failure, which may end in death. Cats with liver damage may become jaundiced (yellowing of the skin and mucous membranes).

Management involves supportive care and tube feeding to provide the cat with sufficient nutrients, plus diagnostics to figure out what the underlying cause of the episode is.

Hepatic lipidosis can occur in cats of any age and body condition, but overweight cats are the most at risk. Their ample fat stores can provide plenty of energy, but also quickly overwhelm the liver when the body begins to break them down. Weight control is definitely something that should be practiced with all pets, but cats should never be made to go without food. Discuss weight-loss options with your veterinarian.

**Cancer.** Like humans, many cats with malignant cancers suffer from muscle wasting and weight loss even

if they continue eating normally. This condition is called cancer cachexia. In some cases, the physical nature and location of the tumor cause the cat to become anorexic, while in others the tumor releases factors that affect the cat's desire to eat and/or ability to utilize nutrients. Tumors in the GI (gastrointestinal tract) tract, including the mouth, can make eating painful or

**Your cat may prefer a variety of foods over the same thing every day.**



#### CAUSES OF A LACK OF APPETITE INCLUDE

- ◆ Cancer
- ◆ Hepatic lipidosis (liver disease)
- ◆ Kidney disease
- ◆ Pancreatitis
- ◆ Stress
- ◆ Teeth problems



difficult. Tumors anywhere in the body can impact metabolism. If your cat is losing weight while still eating well, a visit to the veterinarian is definitely in order to rule out cancer.

**Stress.** Cats generally respond to stress by hiding, which may include avoiding their food bowls. Some events that cause stress are adding a new cat or other animal to the family, moving, and being boarded. In cases of household upheaval, make sure your cat's food bowl is in a spot that he or she can get to easily and that feels safe. For example, your cat may not feel comfortable eating anywhere near a dog. If boarding your cat, send some extra special treats along, such as canned food or

bits of meat. Most boarding kennels are also willing to heat up food to entice an anxious cat to eat.

Illness and veterinary visits are also both inherently stressful, which can add to a sick cat's list of woes.

**Appetite Stimulants.** For cats that can't be enticed to eat or who are hospitalized, there are medications that can stimulate appetite and treat nausea. Mirtazapine (brand name Remeron, an appetite stimulant) is the most common option today, but other options include cyproheptadine (an antihistamine and anti-serotonin agent; when serotonin is depressed it can increase appetite), and diazepam (Valium, short-term effect). Appetite stimulants should always be used under the direction of a veterinarian to avoid side effects or reactions between other medications that your cat might be receiving.

Many cats are picky about what they eat, and that in itself is not something to be concerned about. However, if your cat starts eating less and less or quits eating entirely, a veterinary visit is necessary to rule out or treat any medical problems. Even 24 hours without food can be problematic for adult cats, and

#### WHEN TO INVOLVE YOUR VET

- ◆ Eager eater no longer interested in food
- ◆ Increased thirst and/or urination
- ◆ Jaundice
- ◆ Lethargy
- ◆ Noticeable weight loss
- ◆ Smelly food won't entice appetite



The answer may be as simple as those pricey little cans of cat food in a variety of flavors.

kittens must be monitored even more closely. Unexplained weight loss in conjunction with normal or increased food intake is also a reason to go to the vet sooner than later. ♦

#### GROOMING

##### HAIRBALL... (continued from page 3)

act as a mild laxative. These contain oils to help everything move along as well as some vitamins that may be lost due to the action of the laxative. Hairball supplements come in the form of a toothpaste-type tube and have a similar consistency. Generally there are various flavors so you can find one your cat likes. Avoid some of the "home remedies" that often include oil products and don't replace the vitamins that are lost by their use.

Rarely, a cat will develop a blockage from hair accumulations. This can

happen in the stomach with a large amount of hair consumed at one time but more commonly a thick wad of hair will get stuck in the intestines. If you notice your cat trying to vomit but nothing is coming up and she's losing her appetite and acting depressed, you need to contact your veterinarian.

A full physical examination, history, and radiographs (X-rays) generally tell the story, although a contrast study may be required to verify the blockage and locate where it is along the intestinal tract. Sometimes just extra laxa-

tives and fluids at the veterinary clinic will break down and move the wad of hair along. In a worst-case scenario, your cat will require surgery to remove the obstruction. Clearly, prevention is much better than having to treat a hairball obstruction!

Hairballs aren't fun, but with some effort on your part you can prevent most of them. Make grooming a regular part of your cat's care. You will both come to enjoy the time spent together. That extra care is a small price to pay for feline companionship. ♦



**KIDNEY...***(continued from cover)*

good substances, such as water to help with hydration, sodium to keep blood pressure steady, plus calcium and vitamin D to maintain healthy bones. Potassium is another essential electrolyte that the kidneys help to regulate. While doing that filtration work, the kidneys also manufacture erythropoietin, which is important for the production of red blood cells. Clearly, healthy kidneys are essential to your cat's health.

Luckily, Mother Nature saw fit to give cats "extra" kidney capacity. A cat can get along quite happily with just one kidney and even does reasonably well health-wise with up to 75 percent of renal function gone. Still, once your feline family member goes over that mark, kidney failure is already upon him. That extra capacity also means that cats are often not diagnosed with kidney problems until the disease is well established. This means treatment may be delayed and your cat may already be ill by the time he is diagnosed.

**Symptoms of Kidney Problems.**

One of the early signs of kidney problems is increased drinking and a corresponding increase of wetness in the litter box. Accidents outside the litter box may increase in frequency. Your cat may

vomit or have diarrhea and often shows a loss of appetite with corresponding weight loss.

The buildup of toxins in the blood can lead to a depressed cat or even more severe neurologic signs such as seizures, circling, or head pressing. Some cats will die from these toxic buildups. Eventually a cat with chronic kidney failure may also become anemic since red blood cell production is affected.

**Diagnosis.** A diagnosis of chronic kidney failure is generally done via blood work and an accompanying urinalysis. In the blood sample, the laboratory will look for increased levels of the toxins such as blood urea nitrogen (BUN) and creatinine. Anemia may show up in the complete blood count. Phosphorous levels may be increased. Urinalysis may show protein loss in the urine and a lack of ability to concentrate the urine. Senior cats — eight to 10 years of age and older — should have yearly blood work and a urinalysis as part of their wellness exams.

A relatively new test looks for levels of SDMA (symmetric dimethylarginine) in the blood. This test checks for levels of a molecule that is a fairly specific marker of kidney disease. Increased SDMA may show up much earlier than some of the other diagnostic tests. Earlier diagnosis means faster treatment and a better chance for a longer, healthier life for your cat. This test can be ordered by your

veterinarian and only requires a small blood sample.

Chronic kidney failure cannot be cured, with the exception of kidney transplantation. Very few veterinary hospitals offer this option. It requires a donor cat who is then adopted by the family and multiple medications given daily to prevent rejection. This is not a practical solution for most families.

The goal for most cats is to control and hopefully slow the progression of the disease. Many cats can live high-quality lives for prolonged periods of time after diagnosis, but they do require attentive care. Since kidney failure does progress, the stage at which your cat is diagnosed will determine what care you start off with. Your goal is to keep your cat comfortable, lower the amount of wastes the kidneys need to filter, maintain hydration, and replace any important substances that may be getting lost through the kidneys.

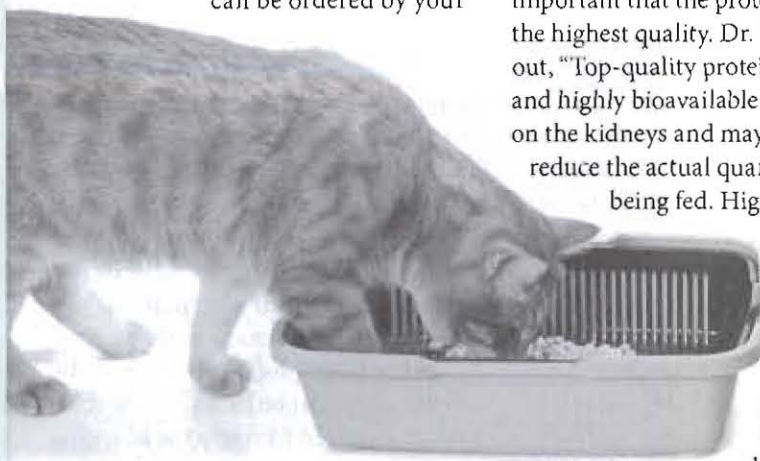
**Treatment.** Your veterinarian will help you to design a custom treatment plan for your cat. Your cat will need regular evaluations of his disease, including blood work and urinalyses, to be sure that the plan is meeting his needs and to adjust as needed with progression of the problem.

Diet is extremely important for cats with kidney failure. All cats need a fairly high level of protein in their diet. For cats with chronic kidney failure, it is very important that the protein they eat be of the highest quality. Dr. Wakshlag points out, "Top-quality protein that is complete and highly bioavailable means less work on the kidneys and may mean you can reduce the actual quantity of protein

being fed. High-quality protein for your cat means dairy, modest portions of meat sources, and eggs. Meat tends to have higher nitrogen (more buildup of

**WHAT YOU CAN DO**

- ◆ Be aware of overly wet litter boxes
- ◆ Encourage fluid intake (broth, fountains)
- ◆ Avoid table scraps
- ◆ Feed restricted amounts of high-quality protein (discuss with your veterinarian)
- ◆ Consider a prescription diet
- ◆ Discuss subcutaneous fluids with your vet
- ◆ Maintain regular vet visits and lab tests



You may notice your cat's litter box is unusually wet.





**Make sure your cat has access to fresh water.** You also can offer low-sodium broth in a separate bowl.

potentially toxic wastes) so a blend of protein sources is best.”

The diet will also need adequate fat and carbohydrates to cover for any added energy requirements since all the protein will be needed for building and maintaining tissues and cells, while excesses will lead to uremic toxins. Polyunsaturated omega 3 fatty acids may aid in renal function, too. Phosphorous is the most important mineral to control in the diet and must be carefully controlled so it does not build up to toxic levels; while potassium, sodium, and B vitamins may need to be monitored to maintain adequate levels.

There are a number of excellent prescription diets for cats with kidney failure. The amount of protein restriction varies with the individual diet. You may need to experiment to find which food your cat finds most palatable. Remember that cats are creatures of habit, so do your diet changes over a period of time — not abruptly!

Start by mixing in just a small amount of the new food. As your cat becomes comfortable with the change, add in more of the kidney diet and decrease the amount of his previous diet. Do not

use treats or give any table foods that may complicate your cat's condition.

Fluids are extremely important for cats with a kidney problem. As renal failure progresses, your cat loses his ability to concentrate his urine. He will need to drink more to compensate for the fluid loss. Start by making sure your cat has free access to fresh water at all times.

Use of a fountain may increase his water consumption, but be prepared to also offer low sodium broth or diluted fluid from tuna canned in water. Those flavor additives may stimulate more drinking. In addition, feed canned

foods if at all possible, as those foods will add some fluid to your cat's diet.

As kidney disease progresses, your cat may need occasional, or even daily, treatments with subcutaneous fluids. Your veterinarian or a veterinary technician can train you to give the fluids, which go under the skin. Luckily, most cats have loose skin and tolerate fluid treatments extremely well. Always use the fluids provided by your veterinarian. Follow protocols carefully to prevent any chance of infection.

While diet and fluids are the mainstays of therapy for feline renal disease, there are additional medications that your cat may need. High blood pressure can result from kidney failure, as can anemia. Both of these health problems can be handled with medications if necessary.

If your cat develops any other health problems, your veterinarian will need to adjust medications in light of the reduced kidney function. So if you need to visit an animal emergency clinic or new veterinary clinic, always advise the clinicians there of your cat's kidney status.

The bottom line is that many cats will develop reduced kidney function or even full-blown kidney failure as they age. By managing diet and fluid intake, along with giving any supportive medications as needed, you can help your cat to live a full and comfortable life despite this health problem. Many cats live for years after a diagnosis of kidney failure. ♦

## KIDNEY FAILURE IN YOUNG CATS

While most cases of kidney failure in cats are age-related problems, there are two other major categories of kidney failure seen in cats.

First are toxin-related renal damages. Kidney damage can occur after exposure to a variety of toxins, including certain plants (such as lilies) medications, and household products.

Another area is congenital (present at birth) kidney disease. Polycystic kidney disease in Persian cats (also seen in Scottish Folds, Himalayans and even some shorthair cats) can be a cause of genetic chronic kidney failure. Signs may show up in very young kittens, or may not show up until later in life.





Elizabeth

Elizabeth is thankful for the assistance of the Cornell Feline Health Center in providing the answer on this page.

## Lilies are Dangerous — Indoor Cats are Especially Vulnerable

**Q** Is it OK that we planted lilies in our garden? A friend of mine said we're poisoning the neighborhood cats. I certainly don't want to do that! I've had cats all my life and never heard of a cat poisoned by eating a lily. We've even had lily plants inside. My cat stays strictly indoors so I'm not worried about her in our garden, but I do see our neighbors' cats out and about.

**A** Yes, certain lilies are toxic to cats. They are "nephrotoxic," meaning ingestion of even a small amount results in kidney damage.

Signs of poisoning include:

- ◆ Uncharacteristic sluggishness
- ◆ Unsteady gait
- ◆ Drooling
- ◆ Heavy breathing
- ◆ Diarrhea
- ◆ Seizures
- ◆ Sudden bouts of vomiting.

My colleagues at the Cornell Feline Health Center tell me that all plants in the genus *lilium* and genus *hemerocallis* carry the toxic principle, including common garden varieties (Stargazers, tiger lilies, peace lilies, and daylilies) and the beautiful Easter lilies that are often displayed as indoor potted plants and cut flowers during the spring holidays.

Cats can be poisoned by ingesting ANY PART of one of these lilies: leaves, stems, flowers, stamens — even the pollen is toxic.

If a cat owner discovers that their cat has ingested a lily, or had even minor exposure such as biting a leaf or getting pollen on their coat or whiskers, it is vital that they contact their veterinarian immediately. Aggressive treatment begun within 18 hours of ingestion has the best chance of preventing serious kidney damage.



Inspect all bouquets for poisonous flowers before your cat grabs a bite.

Cat owners should avoid bringing potted lilies into the house, and should be certain to check bouquets of cut flowers carefully before display. It's important to remember how resourceful we indoor cats can be — if we want to nibble on some fresh greens we'll find a way to open a closed door or jump onto a supposedly inaccessible counter top to get to a plant or vase. My best advice is to strictly ban lilies from inside a cat's house.

Outside doesn't tend to be as big a problem, as we cats are pretty smart, but it is possible for our outdoor friends to suffer the same nephrotoxic effects after exposure to garden plants. Most reported cases of lily intoxication involve indoor cats nibbling on a plant or bouquet brought into the house (we just can't resist a chew on a house plant).

Our Cornell friends add that tulips, foxglove, poinsettias, and philodendron are among hundreds of plants that are known to be poisonous to cats. Ingesting just a small leaf of some common ornamental plants could be enough to make a cat ill, and swallowing a sizable amount could prove fatal. You can download a PDF of poisonous plants from the Humane Society at: [www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/pets/poisonous\\_plants.pdf](http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/pets/poisonous_plants.pdf) ◆

—Sincerely, Elizabeth

### PLEASE SHARE YOUR QUESTIONS

We welcome questions on health, medicine and behavior, but regret that we cannot comment on prior diagnoses and specific products. Please write CatWatch Editor, 535 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT 06854-1713 or email [catwatcheditor@cornell.edu](mailto:catwatcheditor@cornell.edu).

### COMING UP ...

DENTAL AND GUM CARE



LOWER URINARY TRACT DISEASE



RINGWORM



AGGRESSIVE CATS

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