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Repetitive behaviours

If your pet is doing something over and over again for no apparent reason, such as spinning, licking, grooming to the point of losing hair, chasing unseen objects, barking rhythmically, flank sucking, or aggression such as foot chewing and tail chasing, then it is exhibiting either displacement behaviour, stereotypic or compulsive behaviour.

Displacement behaviour

Displacement behaviours arise in situations of conflict, or when your pet is confused and motivated to do two opposing things at once. For example if a dog wants to greet another dog but is slightly anxious about the other dog's behaviour, he may yawn and start to groom himself or sniff the ground. These behaviours are a bit like the "fiddle" response we often do when we're a bit nervous about how to approach a situation. They are usually normal behaviours but appear to be inappropriate for the situation, or "out of context".

Compulsive behaviour

If an animal is repeatedly placed in a state of conflict, it might practice displacement behaviour increasingly often. The displacement behaviour may occur in any state of stress or anxiety, and become easier and easier to be triggered, like a habit, to the point where the animal loses control over when to start and stop the behaviour. The behaviour itself (such as grooming) might be a normal behaviour, but has become abnormal because it is now excessive, too intense and out of context. It may develop into a stereotype.



Stereotypic behaviour

This is behaviour which has no obvious function but is repeated, to the exclusion of normal behaviours. Circling and pacing as seen in captive animals in barren, unenriched zoo enclosures are an example of this. Head bobbing in birds, excessive grooming in cats, weaving in horses and circling in dogs might also be considered stereotypies. Often stereotypical behaviour is derived from a normal behaviour, and its origins may be as a displacement behaviour or compulsive disorder.

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Causes for repetitive behaviour are many and varied!

Often displacement behaviours will arise spontaneously because of conflict or stress, but they may also become a learnt behaviour. This can happen if they receive attention from you when they perform the act, so it is reinforced and may become an attention-seeking habit. Such attention might be your laughter and praise when the young kitten or puppy first chases its tail, or if you offer food or a toy to try to interrupt the behaviour.

Medical conditions must be diagnosed, ruled out or treated. If the behaviour involves excessive grooming, licking or self-mutilation, then skin conditions and allergies must be thoroughly assessed. If it directed to a joint (such as the lower front leg as in acral lick dermatitis), then arthritis or fractures should be ruled out.

Neurological disorders may also contribute to the development of stereotypical behaviour. Genetics may also play a part, as many breeds are over-represented for repetitive behaviours. Dobermans are the most common breed presented for flank-sucking, Bull Terriers for tail chasing, and Oriental breeds of cats for wool-sucking.

Treatment depends on the severity of the problem, and each individual case will be managed a different way. There is no “one-size fits all” approach to these problems.

Sometimes the behaviour does not need to be altered if it is not causing harm to the animal, or if it is not seriously annoying to you. It may be an effective calming strategy for your pet, and may help it cope with its environment.

If triggers for the behaviour can be identified, these need to be addressed. Reducing conflict and stress in the environment is important, as is providing opportunities for physical and mental stimulation. Exercise, play, social companionship, interactive food-releasing toys and training are all examples of this.

Preventing the animal from performing the behaviour may compromise your pet’s welfare. Elizabethan collars, muzzles or bandages may cause frustration and rebound behaviour when these are removed. It is more important and constructive in the long term to seek professional help to identify the underlying cause, and find ways to manage this.



Drug therapy can be extremely helpful to regulate neurochemicals in the brain that are often unbalanced in animals with stereotypical and compulsive behaviour.