

Baffling Behaviors

Why do your pets do the FUNNY THINGS they do? Here are some answers.

YOU AND YOUR PET speak different languages, but most of the time you understand each other pretty well. Even so, there are probably instances when your pet's behavior makes you scratch your head. "Though we tend to view and treat our dogs and cats as members of our human family, pets retain many behavioral propensities inherited from their animal ancestors," says Katherine Miller, an animal behaviorist with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. What may appear unusual is perfectly natural from your pet's perspective. Here are some of the most common of these seemingly odd activities and the reasons behind them.

WHY DOES MY DOG...

...chase toys I throw but not bring them back to me?

Fetching is a learned behavior. Most dogs must be trained to retrieve. But a toy's color may also play a part. Dogs are essentially red-green colorblind, so finding and retrieving a red ball in green grass, for example, is a challenge. Use a blue toy when playing fetch so it stands out clearly.

...become scared by certain noises?

A dog's hearing is much more sensitive than ours, but a genetic tendency toward nervousness may cause some pets to react strongly to noises. In addition, we used to depend on dogs to warn us against danger, so they've been bred to respond to unfamiliar noises, sights, and people. A dog is also more likely to react adversely to noises—whether it's the rustle of a plastic

bag or the roar of a vacuum cleaner—if it hasn't been exposed to them before 12 weeks of age. This is one of the reasons puppies and kittens benefit from experiencing all aspects of everyday life. To calm your dog when a noise is bothering it, offer a treat or a meal, or provide distraction with playtime.

...circle and paw its blanket or pillow before lying down?

This is a residual behavior from when canines flattened or fluffed vegetation or the earth to make their beds in the wild. Some dogs try to dig a little—even on a tile floor.

...burrow under the blankets at the foot of my bed? Is it safe?

Dogs like sleeping in a cozy "den," which makes them feel secure, says Katenna Jones, an animal behaviorist with the American Humane Association. As long as they have a clear, unobstructed way out and are not rolled up inside the blankets, they'll emerge on their own if they need more air. That said, it's a good idea to untuck the sheets and blankets at the bottom of the bed for an easy exit.

...stare at babies the way it does squirrels or birds?

To a dog, they all look, smell, and sound like strange animals. In fact, dogs don't recognize babies as human until babies develop controlled motor skills. To be safe, never leave a baby unattended with any dog.

...eat my hair (as a puppy)?

Puppies explore the world through their mouths and will play with anything. "Dangling hair can be very enticing to investigate, and when puppies realize that tugging on it causes you to tug it back, it can seem like a fun toy," Miller says. Also, our hair's natural oils and even the products we use may smell delicious. Try to discourage this habit by realizing your dog is asking to play and substituting a tug rope or a chew toy.

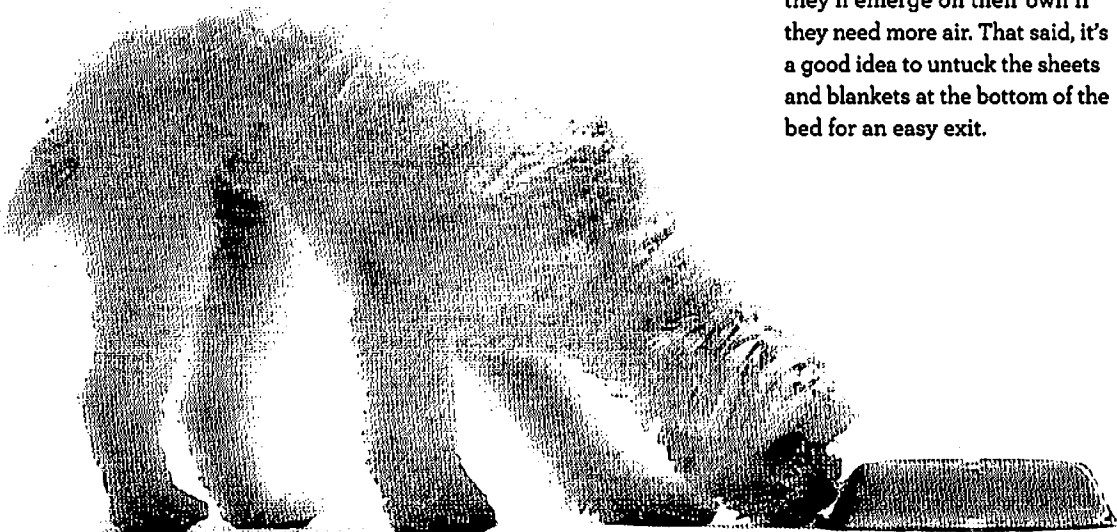
WHY DOES MY CAT...

...like to drink water from anywhere but its bowl?

Cats are descended from the Near Eastern wildcat (a desert-dwelling animal that rarely drinks from a standing pool) and have similar instincts. Still water is also less aerated, and thus less tasty, which further explains the appeal of drinking

A NOSE FOR DINNER

When dogs anticipate mealtime, they may nudge their bowl, especially if this has prompted you to fill it with food in the past. They likely learned that this behavior makes dinner come more quickly.



from a dripping faucet or a bubbling fish tank. Plus, cats see the motion of the running water and think it's a game.

...prefer to scratch my new sofa rather than older furniture?

A new sofa doesn't have the familiar smell of home, so your cat marks it with the scent glands in its paws by scratching. This scent calms your cat, just as personalizing your décor makes your house feel like home to you. To deter scratching, put a scratching post near your pet's sleeping area (since cats like to scratch when they wake up) and apply double-sided tape to surfaces you want to keep claw-free.

...talk to her toys when she plays?

Cats chatter when they're excited by prey, whether alive or stuffed, and are ready to pounce. (By the way, your cat can tell the difference between a live and a stuffed animal, but they're both fun.) A cat may also have learned that when it vocalizes, you are more apt to engage in playtime.

...lie on my books and newspapers while I read?

For the same undivided attention you're giving your reading material. Even if you shoo your pet away, it's still attention. Dogs do this, too. The best way to discourage this behavior in dogs or cats is to walk away.

...like to put its nose right near my mouth, and breathe?

"Nose-to-nose greetings are a natural, friendly cat greeting behavior," Miller says. Cats have an incredible sense of smell and learn a lot about the things and people around them through their odors. They may also be fascinated by the many layers of smell on your breath.

...object to being on the other side of a closed door?

If your cat is used to moving freely about the house, it likely feels frustrated when denied access to a room or you. (Miller says cats rarely complain about doors that are always closed, as with a pantry closet or a garage door.) If you need to shut doors to keep your cat out of an area of the house, make the closing of the door correspond with something good happening, such as dinnertime; or tire your cat out by playing beforehand, so it prefers to relax rather than complain.

...knead my lap, the sofa, and her bed before sleeping?

It's a behavior retained from nursing. A kitten kneads its mother's mammary glands to stimulate milk flow. Cats knead as adults because it feels familiar and good.



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ACTING LIKE THERE'S
A FULL MOON?**

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