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ARE CLUMPING LITTERS A DEADLY CONVENIENCE?

Cats die. Kittens die. It's part of life. But we still grieve when they die, even though we know it's only the body, not the spirit that is gone. How much worse we feel when those deaths were unnecessary--could have been prevented by something as simple as changing the kind of litter we use.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Clumping litter is designed to form a hard, insoluble mass when it gets wet. It also produces a fine dust when stirred (as when a cat scratches around to bury a recent deposit). And these clumping litters absorb many times their weight in fluids.

When cats or kittens use the litter box, they lick themselves clean; anything their tongues encounter gets ingested. Kittens especially tend to ingest a lot of litter when they are first learning to use the box. Once the litter is inside a kitten or cat, it expands, forming a mass and coating the interior--thus, both causing dehydration by drawing fluids out of the cat or kitten, and compounding the problem by preventing any absorption of nutrients or fluids.

Cats and kittens probably react with diarrhea initially in an effort to cleanse their bodies of the litter before it has a chance to settle and coat their insides. But kittens have very small intestines; a hard insoluble mass could very well produce a complete and fatal blockage within a couple of weeks.

You can use a holistic course of treatment (slippery elm to help soothe the intestines; homemade chicken broth to nourish the kittens without putting further strain on their insides).

There has been a rise in depressed immune systems, respiratory distress, irritable bowel syndrome and vomiting (other than hair balls) among cats seen in the past two years. All had one thing in common ...a clumping product in their litter box. In several cases, simply removing the litter improved the condition of the cats." (Healthy Pets--Naturally, April 1994.)

The problem of health difficulties and even deaths resulting from clumping litters appears to be more prevalent than most people are aware of. I recently spoke with another Japanese Bobtail breeder, who told me of a kitten she sold that subsequently became very ill with a severe respiratory problem. The new owner used a clumping litter, and her veterinarian found that the kitten's lungs were coated with dust from the litter.

For a veterinarian to spot this problem is unusual. A more common diagnosis would lay the blame at the door of a virus, germ, fungus, or parasite. There is not a general awareness yet that the clumping litters can be harmful--even fatal-- to cats.

BEYOND CATS

And the problem extends beyond cats. As Lisa Newman points out in her article, dogs get into the litter box for "snacks," and ingest the litter too. She reports that the autopsy of one dog revealed that his stomach was filled with the clumping litter.

An article entitled, "How Cat Litter is Made", recently appeared in Cat Fancy magazine. Shockingly, the article contains no cautions against the use of clumping litters, even though the description of one of the main ingredient in such products should be enough to alarm any thinking person. "Sodium Bentonite, a naturally swelling clay, is often added as an extremely effective clumping agent. When liquid is added, Bentonite swells to approximately 15 times its original volume. But because sodium Bentonite acts as an expandable cement would, litters containing sodium Bentonite should never be flushed; when they expand, they can block plumbing." A few moments' thought is all that is needed to realize that something able to block household plumbing must be wreaking havoc on the plumbing of our feline companions. Kittens pass clay up to two weeks after litter is switched from clumping

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

You might feel as horrified as I do at the thought that there must be thousands of kittens and cats (and other animals) ailing or even dying from clumping clay litters. What can we do to prevent such suffering?

One thing is let the manufacturers know we won't buy such products. My husband called a company that makes one of these clumping litters. The woman he spoke with said that the company is aware that the clumping litters may be causing health problems, but that it is the consumer's responsibility to make sure their cats don't eat the stuff.

My husband pointed out that cats clean themselves with their mouths, so of course they're going to eat the litter every time they use their cat boxes. Unfortunately, the company's representative maintained her "buyer beware" position.

Given the attitudes of such companies, we can vote with our pocketbooks by purchasing products from businesses that are more responsive to our concerns. Be sure to let the makers of the clumping litter know why you no longer purchase their product. You might even choose to boycott all products made by these companies (it isn't hard to find out who makes what--just read the labels). An even more effective move might be to show this article to the owners or managers of stores selling these products.

If you suspect that an animal may be suffering an ailment caused by clumping litter, take him or her to a veterinarian or holistic practitioner immediately, and explain what you think might be happening. If you encounter resistance, it may mean that the veterinarian is unfamiliar with the problem and doesn't know how to handle it. Try to find a holistic--either locally or someone you can work with by phone--who has some experience with clumping litter impacting the intestines. Most importantly, replace the clumping litter right away with one of the plant-based alternatives (i.e. corn, wheat, pine). Even if your cat is healthy, it makes sense to switch to a different litter.

If you love cats as I do, spread the word. Tell everyone you know about this problem. Tell your veterinarian. You may save the lives of many kittens, cats and other beloved creatures.