How Catnip Works

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Some scents cause strong positive reactions in humans. Chocolate. Hot apple pie. Quality perfumes. But none approach the power of catnip to influence our feline pets. That's because human brains are physiologically different, and our sense of smell not nearly as refined. And since there is no scent that causes such a powerful reaction in humans, catnip is hard for us to understand.

Catnip is a perennial herb, Nepeta cateria, a member of the mint family. It is not addictive, and is completely safe for cats. Your cat will probably love an occasional catnip treat.

The catnip reaction

The catnip response affects all of the cat's senses - touch, smell, sight, sound, and taste. Usually powerful, the intensity varies widely among cats. Responses may include initial investigation, oral contact, grasping and kicking, and abandonment, and a number of other behaviors, including…

- Sneezing
- Sniffing
- Licking and chewing
- Head shaking
- Chin and cheek rubbing
- Head-over roll and body rubbing
- Eating the catnip
- Mewing and purring

The reaction to catnip normally lasts a few minutes, and then the behavior quickly subsides. It can then take an hour or two away from the catnip for the cat to "reset." Then, the same reaction can occur again.

The chemistry of catnip

Although no one knows exactly what happens in the cat's brain, it is known that the chemical nepetalactone in catnip triggers the response, kicking off a stereotypical pattern in cats that are sensitive to the chemical. The catnip reaction is inherited in an autosomal dominant gene. Up to a third of adult cats, in which the gene is not present, are totally unaffected by catnip. Kittens under 3 months of age do not usually react to catnip, either.

Types of catnip

Catnip can be found in the wild, grown in herb gardens, or purchased in many dried forms. Most cat owners find using dried catnip in its many configurations to be the most convenient.

Fresh - During summer months catnip is fairly easy to grow. You can allow your cat access to the garden, or harvest leaves and bring them into the house. Catnip may also be grown in indoor gardens, providing a fresh supply of leaves, and possibly distracting cats from chewing ornamental houseplants.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

When your cat brushes against or paws fresh catnip leaves it releases their powerful oils and irresistible scent. Should your cat eat fresh or processed catnip it is not a problem. Your cat is just satisfying her taste forgreens. Keep in mind that your cat's reaction to the catnip is due to scent, not ingestion.

Dried - Catnip plants exist in a number of varieties and have a tremendous variance in the pungency of their scent. When harvesting, drying and processing catnip, it is important that the manufacturer take every step possible to retain its scent and essential oils. To be effective, catnip needs to be fresh. To retain its potency, it needs to be stored in a place where it will not be overly dried.

Best ways to provide catnip

We located and tested many types of catnip in order to provide cat owners the most potent, consistent, and highest quality products possible. Each of the following will maximize the fun for your cat.

- **Toys** - Catnip is incorporated into thousands of popular cat toys.
- **Flakes and Pellets** - Always look for fresh, 100% pure catnip. Most pellets are 50% stronger than flakes. Both flakes and pellets can be inserted in replenish toys, offered in bowls, or sprinkled about the cat's favorite play zone.
- **Spray** - Using a convenient spray mist, catnip may be applied to cat furniture and play areas to enhance or modify behavior. For example, application of catnip to a scratching post could make it more attractive than your new sofa.

Catnip is by no means necessary for the well-being of any cat, but it is pleasant, safe, and fun. We recommend that you give catnip about once a week to ensure that the effects do not diminish.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*