Coprophagy: Why Gerbils Eat Their Droppings

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Believe it or not, there is a good reason for this unappetizing behavior. Your pet is merely completing a special, natural digestive process that allows him to maximize the nutrition he receives from his food. This process is most frequently referred to as "coprophagy."

Once is not enough

Your pet is a herbivore, meaning he receives his nutrition from plants. Plant material is often difficult to digest. To help with this, herbivores have special adaptations. First, they have large numbers of special bacteria in their digestive systems. These bacteria can break down the plant material into smaller nutrients the animal can absorb. Secondly, many herbivores chew their food twice: when it is first eaten, and then again after it has been exposed to the bacteria in the digestive tract. This second chewing breaks the plant material into smaller pieces, releasing more of the nutrients.

We know that cows and sheep chew their cud. They chew and swallow their food, which goes to a special section of their stomach containing the helpful bacteria. The bacteria help digest the food. After a while, the food material is passed back up from the stomach to the mouth. This is called the cud. The animals chew the cud and swallow it again, and it makes its way through the rest of the digestive tract, where the nutrients are absorbed. Your pet does basically the same thing, except the food goes all the way through the digestive tract before your pet eats it and chews it again.

Your pet's digestion

Each time your pet eats a serving of food, he chews and swallows it. The food moves down his esophagus to his stomach and then into the small intestine. The small intestine is the part of the digestive tract that is best at absorbing the nutrients from food. However, at this point, few of the nutrients have been released from the food. The food makes its way into the cecum, where most of the helpful bacteria are. The bacteria break down the plant material and the nutrients are released. The material and nutrients then move to the colon. Unfortunately, the colon cannot absorb many nutrients. The feces, then, still have considerable nutritional value. To gain the most nutrition from the food, the animal ingests the feces and chews them again. This material then goes through the small intestine a second time, where the nutrients can be absorbed.

The importance of coprophagy

Healthy, nutrient-rich foods and supplements are key to keeping your pet healthy and happy. And without coprophagy, many of the nutrients in your pet's food would be lost, passed through the colon, and eliminated as feces. So don't be alarmed or discourage your pet from eating his feces. It's part of his normal digestive process. This seemingly tasteless behavior has a definite impact on your small pet's health and well-being.

*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.*