



The Catnip Conundrum

When it comes to the inspirational herb, it's often best to just say yes

BY ARNA COHEN

To 'nip or not to 'nip—that is the question. Is it better for cats to suffer the fingers and coos of outrageous visitors without relief, or for shelter staff to take up medicinal herbs against this sea of boredom and, by indulging, liven things up a bit?

While the subject of catnip has provoked the occasional heated discussion on shelter listservs over the years, the experts interviewed for this story agreed that, for the majority of cats, there's nothing to ponder: Life is much more interesting with catnip. And in a shelter setting, a daily pinch of it can be a simple, inexpensive, and superbly effective way to spark up a cage-bound cat's routine.

Just ask Rudy, a cat awaiting adoption at the Animal Welfare League of Arlington (AWLA) in Virginia, where staff regularly use catnip to add variety and excitement to the feline guests' days. Well, you *could* ask him, if he weren't busy flipping, rolling, and kicking madly at his catnip mouse. Or Helen, an affectionate 8-year-old female at AWLA who purrs loudly and



Some kitties are hip to the nip ...

rub her face and body in loose catnip until she's covered from head to tail.

Providing catnip is just one component of the larger cat enrichment trend happening at many shelters. Cats need more than just a few minutes of petting a day to keep boredom from setting in. While many cats tend to hide when they first come into the shelter, once they've gotten accustomed to the daily routine, kitties will need regular doses of mental and physical stimulation to stay healthy.

Catnip is a quick and easy way to provide both. "Most cats like catnip, and it can be powerfully pleasing," says Brenda Griffin, D.V.M., adjunct associate professor of shelter medicine at the University of



... while others are oblivious to its herbal appeal.

Florida. "It [provides] sensory enrichment and can stimulate play behavior."

And overall, she thinks the effects are harmless. "If I were in a cage, I would love to have a beer each day as part of my routine."

Mild Stimulant or Kitty Crack?

The effects of catnip on cats are well-known. A few whiffs can make even the most dedicated couch potato lose his dignity. Catnip revs up almost every cat species, from 400-pound lions to pint-sized sand cats—though tigers seem to be immune.

And not every domestic cat responds to it: Kittens ignore it until they're about 3 months old, and an es-

estimated 20 to 30 percent of adult cats couldn't care less about it.

It's a genetic thing, you see. Catnip sensitivity is hereditary, and if a cat doesn't get that gene, he will forever turn his nose up at catnip. It's not that he can't smell it; it simply does nothing for him. One-year-old Pogo, also a guest of AWLA, seems to be one of the catnip immune. Presented with a little pile of the magic herb, he sniffs it, then looks up as if to say, "Yeah, so?"

Scientists don't know the neurological explanation for the varieties of catnip reactions; they theorize that nepetalactone, the active chemical in catnip, mimics feline "happy" pheromones and stimulates the corresponding receptors in the feline brain.

Effects of the 'nip may also depend on how it's absorbed. Inhaling its smell can drive kitties crazy, whereas eating it has a sedative effect—a bit like an after-dinner liqueur. Debby Williams, veterinary services manager at the SPCA Serving Erie County in Tonawanda, N.Y., recalls the morning a well-meaning, new-to-the-job kennel attendant mixed lots of catnip into the cat food. "The cats were nice and calm," she jokes. "We did a lot of adoptions that day!"

One cat, however, didn't react so well. "He was hissing and spitting, and his eyes were dilated. He was definitely seeing more than one of us humans."

To Each His Own

Indeed, any shelter considering allowing its cats access to catnip should consider the variety of feline responses to the herb—and should try it out in small doses before initiating any overall 'Nip Policy.

Catnip-influenced behavior can take a few different forms. It's hard to say whether the mental states induced are always pleasant for the cat, but the behaviors that accompany the kitty "trip" may either appeal to or put off adopters. It will depend on how they feel about the many faces of "nipper madness"—the drooling fool who rubs himself in it and squints his eyes in delight; the possessed creature who claws the rug, dis-

embowels his toy, and tears around the house; and occasionally the 'nipper who becomes overstimulated and toy-protective, swatting and growling at anyone who tries to touch his mouse.

"When we have new cats, it's trial and error in finding out how they will react," says Sherri Leggett, director of operations at the Cat Care Society in Lakewood, Colo. To cope with that unpredictability, staff members offer kitties loose catnip before the shelter opens, so that "if they get crazy, they'll have settled down before the public comes in." But there are always a few catnip toys in the communal cat rooms, she notes.

The Mohawk and Hudson River Humane Society in Menands, N.Y., uses the same strategy, providing catnip only when the shelter's not open to the public. Staff want to make sure visitors are safe from accidental bites or scratches from overeager partakers.

They also want to make sure the adopters understand what they're get-

ting: "It has a tendency to alter [cats'] behavior, making it difficult for adopters to get a feel for the animal's personality," says executive director Brad Shear.

Leggett, on the other hand, believes that catnip doesn't mask a cat's true colors; rather, his reaction to it is part of his personality. Knowing how catnip affects him, she believes, can help a potential adopter make the right decision.

Catnip can also help newly arrived felines who are having trouble adjusting to their surroundings. Leggett finds that catnip can bring a shy cat out of his shell or pacify an angry cat, and Williams uses it to encourage stressed-out kitties to eat.

While catnip isn't harmful or addictive, some cats will do anything for it. "We clicker-train some cats in our enrichment program with it," Williams says. "We teach them to 'give paw' and sit." All cats are different, though; some, she notes, perform better for cheese. AS

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