

Catnip: What is everyone going crazy for?

Article adapted from the Humane Society of the United States

You find your cat rolling and twisting on the floor, rubbing his face against it and drooling everywhere. Right away you know—he's been in the catnip.

What is catnip, anyway?

Catnip is a member of the mint family, which has about 250 species. The essential oil in catnip, nepetalactone, has a powerful effect on cats who are sensitive to it, turning even the most sedentary couch potato into a flipped-out ball of ecstasy.

Smelling vs. eating

The most intense catnip experience is an olfactory one—your cat smells the herb and then goes nuts. Researchers aren't sure what the neurological explanation is, but it's thought that catnip mimics feline "happy" pheromones and stimulates the receptors in the brain that respond to those pheromones. When eaten, however, catnip seems to have the opposite effect: the cat may become very mellow.



Most cats react to catnip by rolling, flipping, rubbing and eventually zoning out. Other cats become hyperactive, running around like their tails are on fire, and some can get downright aggressive. They must protect their toys! Usually these sessions last about 10 minutes, after which your cat loses interest. It may take as long as two hours for him to "reset" and become susceptible to catnip again.

Not for everyone

Not all cats fall for catnip. It's an inherited sensitivity, and if your cat didn't get that gene, he simply won't care about catnip. An estimated 50 percent of cats don't respond. The trait doesn't emerge until a cat is between three and six months old; until then, a kitten will not have a response.

For humans, too

Catnip has been grown in medicinal gardens for centuries for its sedative effect on humans. Made into a tea, catnip has calming properties similar to chamomile. Concentrated nepetalactone is also an excellent mosquito repellent, 10 times more powerful than DEET, the most widely used chemical repellent. The only hitch is that it only lasts a few hours.

For dogs

This beneficial herb can be good for your dog's health too. You probably will not see the same reaction as in your kitties, but health-wise it can help with nervousness and diarrhea.

Keepin' it fresh

Catnip loses its potency over time, so to keep fresh, store it in the freezer in an airtight container or bag.

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
Visit our website at www.sdhumane.org to view our behavior and training options,
or call the **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.