



Catnip – Fun for Cats!

Catnip is one of those things, that for some cats, can make an old toy new, and a rainy day a bit more exciting. Have you ever wondered though if all that extra playtime comes at a cost? Is it healthy for them, or addicting? Why do only some cats seem effected?

Catnip is one of hundreds of species in the mint family. It's a European plant that's topped with white and purple spotted flowers, and one that will spread like crazy in your garden. It contains a chemical compound called Nepetalactone, which is distributed throughout its leaves and stems. Cats will rub and chew it to break the stems and leaves, releasing this chemical!

Catnip attracts cats and is a stimulant (and very mild hallucinogen) when sniffed. Whether a cat will react to catnip is genetically determined, so only about 50% of cats are affected by it at all. Young kittens (under 3 months) don't seem to ever react, though they may grow into cats that do love it once they're six months old or so. Older cats often don't react, even if they did while they were younger.

The behavior this compound produces varies widely from cat to cat. Generally cats get hyperactive as the roll around, flip and speed through the room. Rubbing, licking, eating, growling and sniffing are also common behaviors when the catnip is sniffed. When it's eaten, catnip can have the opposite effect. It "mellows out" the cat and acts as a mild sedative.

The effects of catnip last only about 10 minutes, so they typically won't overdo it! It usually takes at least two hours away from catnip, for the cat to react to it once again. In addition, if they're exposed to catnip a lot, they may stop reacting to it altogether.

If a cat does seem to like it, it's not at all harmful for them. It's completely nontoxic, but if they eat too much of it they (rarely) may vomit or have diarrhea. Also, be aware that fresh catnip (from your garden) is much more potent than the dried, store-bought stuff! Whichever you use, it will lose its potency over time, so store it in an airtight container (in the freezer if possible) and it will liven up your cat's days for months to come!