

THE MYTHS AND BENEFITS OF CAT GRASS

Cat grass is actually a name used to describe several different types of grass which are popular with cats. Cat grass sometimes gets confused with '*catnip*' which is a perennial herb from the mint family labiatae. Catnip, but not cat grass, contains an essential oil '*nepetalactone*' that can make some cats '*high*'. Cats are known to sometimes respond to catnip by sniffing, chewing and licking it plus head shaking, followed by chin, cheek, and body rubbing on it. Cat grass however does not induce this '*high*' feeling in cats and can be beneficial to them.

Some different types of cat grass

There are several types of cat grass for cats to consume. Cats much prefer the young grass shoots as these are sweeter and softer compared to a more mature grass that is not as soft and could go to seed.

Some varieties of cat grass include:

- Orchard grass or cock's-foot (*Dactylis glomerata*)
- Common oat, cat oat (*Avena sativa*)
- Barley (*Hordeum vulgare*)
- Wheatgrass (*Triticum aestivum*)

Cats eat grass for several reasons and these can include:

To supplement their diet:

Grass juice contains folic acid (*vitamin B9*) that can help support the cat's growth and increase the oxygen levels in their blood. If your cat is chewing on grass then it might mean that they needs a vitamin boost in this area or they might have a dietary deficiency.

To help anxiety:

Some cats are known to engage in what's termed as '*stress or emotional eating*' which causes the cat to eat, and this is not to reduce the hunger pangs, but to relieve anxiety. The cat might also be showing signs of '*displacement*' behaviour which is an out of context or an irrelevant response to prolonged or repetitive behaviour that serves no apparent useful purpose. The normal behaviours then becomes excessive and when stress hits they need an outlet. Some cats can over groom themselves, become excessively vocal or engage in some sort of activity to soothe themselves such as eating.

If you notice that your cat is chewing on grass excessively or displaying any signs of stress or anxiety then get in touch with your Vet who can help your cat with this psychological issue.

Parasites:

A common theory is that cats eat grass because they feel unwell and ingestion helps them to vomit, which may help the cat to feel better.

Some Researchers though conclude that this is unlikely and that the grass consumption is just an instinctive behaviour to help purge their stomach tract of parasitic worms.

Fur or Hairballs:

Cats are clean animals and are often seen grooming themselves: as the cat grooms itself to remove the loose hair from their coat this can then get caught up in their tongue and swallowed. Most of the hair will pass through their digestive tract with no problems but some can stay in the stomach and form what is called the '*fur or hair ball*'. Usually this is vomited and coughed up and it can then look like a rather an unpleasant thin, tube like blob of fur where the name comes from. It has been stated that cat grass can also simply relieve an upset stomach.

Outside grass:

Be careful if your cat eats outside grass to ensure that it hasn't been treated with pesticides or fertilizers. If it has then its best to keep your cat well away from it as it would be poisonous. A safe alternative is to grow your own grass indoors for your cat. You can purchase a cat grass kit or cheaper still, grow your own. Most garden stores and major Hardware stores sell pots of cat grass or you can purchase a packet of seeds and grow your own.

How to grow your cat grass:

Cat grass is very easy to grow. You will simply just need:

- a small pot to grow it in
 - a packet of organic potting soil (*this is safer as your cats could be digging in it and you don't want any fertilizer mixed in with it*)
 - a packet of cat grass seeds
 - some plastic cling wrap
 - and water
- 1) Start by filling your pot with the soil stopping about 25 to 50 mm from the top of the pot and then simply scatter a handful of cat grass seed over the top of this in a thin layer.
 - 2) Add a few handfuls of the soil over the top of the seeds so that they are covered with the soil.

- 3) Water the seeds in with about half a cup of water as you want the soil to be moist.
- 4) Cover them with the plastic cling wrap that's not too tight as you still want an airflow to come through. Place them in a warm, dark place for a couple of days until the little spouts will start appearing. Still check every day though that the soil stays moist.
- 5) When the spouts appear you can take off the plastic cling wrap and then keep them in a nice sunny position. When your grass is about 100 to 150 mm it is ready for the cat to eat.

An alternative way to grow cat grass without using potting mix:

You will need:

- a glass jar with a wide opening or a bowl
- some decorative stones available from a garden shop, major Hardware stores or a '*bargain*' type shop
- Some unbleached Paper towels or even a coffee filter
- Grass Seeds
- Water

- 1) Simply fill your jar or bowl with the stones: to about 2/3 full.
- 2) Place on top the paper towel or coffee filter and arrange your grass seeds on top of this. If you want to speed up the process you can pre-soak your seeds beforehand overnight in water.
- 3) After a couple days your seeds will begin to sprout and then when they have grown to about 100 to 150 mm they are ready for the cat to eat.

Remember though to keep the stones watered and not to let them dry out.

To summarise, cat grass can be highly beneficial to your cat's health and wellbeing and by preparing this yourself you can make it an inexpensive indoor gardening exercise.