



PENINSULA  
HUMANE  
SOCIETY  
& SPCA

# Self-Mutilation

## **Cause**

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If your animal is constantly licking and chewing himself or pulling out his fur, the first thing to do is visit your veterinarian. These are often signs of health conditions that need medical attention. Pain and discomfort from more serious problems, as well as from minor skin conditions, can cause a pet to chew himself, so please do *not* try to diagnose the problem yourself. See your vet.

Usually when the ailment troubling your pet goes away, so does the self-mutilating behavior. Sometimes the behavior continues as a habit even though the health problem is long gone.

Many animals have excess nervous energy and no way to vent the stress, so they develop a habit or pastime of licking themselves raw. Some animals actually learn this behavior because their human makes such a fuss over them whenever they indulge in such activities. “Oh, Rover, you poor, poor, thing, what’s wrong with your little paws? Are they itchy or sore? Oh, you poor baby.” Pat, pat, stroke, stroke. It doesn’t take long for Rover to realize this is a quick and easy way to gain instant attention and affection.

## **Treatment**

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The key to stopping this habit is distraction, giving the animal something else to do, and not unintentionally rewarding him. First, be sure to provide him with plenty of opportunity to run, play, exercise, and vent his energy. A well-exercised, trained, happy animal is not likely to have to relieve stress or entertain himself by self-mutilation.

Whenever he begins to lick or chew himself, make a very short, sharp, loud sound, just enough to startle him into stopping and looking around to see what happened. After he has stopped for a few minutes, call him over to play a game, do some training, or even get a massage.

Realize that this habit is often just as hard for Fido or Fluffy to stop as it is for humans to stop habits such as fingernail-biting or cigarette smoking, so please be patient and keep trying.