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How Does Your Cat's Tongue Work?

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The Inner Workings of a Cat's Tongue

Anyone who has interacted with a friendly cat or inspected a cat's tongue up close knows that a cat's tongue is unique in a variety of ways. Not only do they have a rough texture that helps in grooming and at mealtime, but they have plenty of other useful functions. Check out these interesting cat tongue facts.

Why Do Cats Have Sandpaper Tongues?

These papillae aid in a cat's ingestion and grooming... by functioning like a hairbrush to grasp loose hair and debris. However, because the papillae face backwards, anything that gets onto the tongue is typically swallowed. This is why [hairballs](#) are such a problem in many cats and why one should never allow their cat to play with yarn, which could be ingested and... requires surgical intervention to fix."

A Cat's Sense of Taste

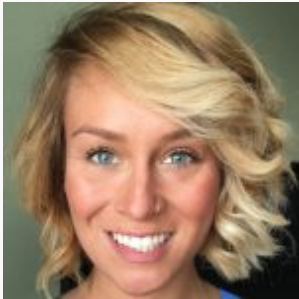
While a human's tongue is mostly used to aid in food consumption and enjoyment, a cat's tongue works in different way. "Felines have significantly fewer taste buds than humans," says Dr. Barrack. "Cats cannot taste sweetness at all and have a more limited sense of tasting bitterness. However, cats can taste adenosine triphosphate (ATP), [found in living cells like meat], while humans cannot... It is suspected that this innately encourages cats to eat meat [and] why they are obligatory carnivores. This means cats can ingest other types of food such as vegetables and grains, but their diet must be primarily composed of meat."

Dog Tongues vs. Cat Tongues

A cat's tongue varies from a dog's in several ways—even when it comes to the way they lap up water. "At a quick glance, it may appear that cats and dogs drink water the same way, but this is not actually the case," says Dr. Barrack. "Dogs curl their tongues inward to create a spoon and scoop water into their mouths. Cats allow their tongues to touch the water and draw back quickly, creating movement in the water [to] suck it in as gravity attempts to pull the water in the opposite direction." Regardless of their differences when it comes to drinking, cats and dogs do share the common practice of using their tongues to cool off. "Cats and dogs both use their tongues to cool down by panting," says Dr. Barrack. "When the saliva evaporates off the tongue, the body cools," adding another impressive quality to the list of unique features a cat's tongue performs.

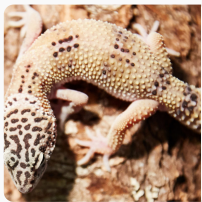
Tongue Out on Tuesdays, but Not Every Day

We've all seen pictures of animals with their tongues out while playing or napping (aka Tongue Out Tuesdays), but is there a reason that your cat may be displaying this sort of behavior more often than not? "Cats may fall asleep with their tongues hanging out when they are super relaxed, or they may not completely retract their tongue in the midst of grooming. However, if your cat's tongue is hanging out all the time, consult your veterinarian," says Dr. Barrack. "It is possible that there is an underlying medical condition preventing the tongue from remaining in the mouth. If [his] tongue is hanging out and accompanied by rapid panting on a hot day, [he] may be suffering from heatstroke. This is a medical emergency and requires the attention of your veterinarian immediately."



Dominika is a Chicago native who graduated from DePaul University with a bachelor's degree in English. Having nearly a decade of combined experience in the fields of marketing, journalism, UX and social, she thrives in the fast-paced and ever-changing world of digital media. When she is not working, Dominika can be found at the beach, traveling the world or cuddling her female Rottie named Ezra.

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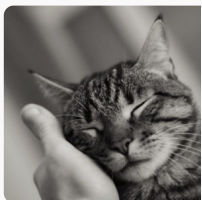
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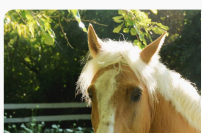
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