

The Great Unstuffing: Why dogs can't resist gutting their toys

There is a particular sound every dog owner knows: the soft, rhythmic rip of stitching giving way, followed by a snowstorm of white fluff drifting across the floor. Within minutes, a \$40 plush toy that once resembled a fox, a duck, or a cheerful hedgehog is reduced to a hollow pelt and a scattered pile of stuffing.

Your dog, meanwhile, is thrilled.

Why do dogs do this? It turns out the urge to 'de-stuff' a toy isn't random destructiveness: it's a fairly direct expression of instincts that predate the couch, the dog bed, and dog toys themselves by tens of thousands of years.

An ancient hunting sequence, replayed in your lounge

Wild canids (wolves, foxes, coyotes) hunt using a predictable chain of behaviours: search, stalk, chase, grab-bite, shake, dissect, and consume the prey. Domestic dogs still carry this sequence wired into their brains, even though almost none of them need to hunt for dinner.

Playing with toys lets dogs express these instinctive behaviours. A plush toy is, in effect, a stand-in prey animal. It has a body, sometimes eyes, sometimes a squeaker that shrieks like a startled rodent. Squeaking toys, in particular, tap into a dog's sensitivity to high-pitched distress calls, the kind small prey makes when caught. Shredding and pulling out the stuffing is simply the 'dissect' step of that ancestral chase-catch-kill sequence.

Breed history sharpens this further. Terriers, bred to dispatch small pests quickly, tend to lean hard into the grab-and-shake portion of the sequence. Retrievers, bred with a 'soft mouth' to bring birds back undamaged, are often gentler with toys although plenty still enjoy a good disembowelment.

The science of the 'ball junkie'

Beyond instinct, researchers have started asking whether some dogs' toy obsessions look less like ordinary play and more like something approaching compulsion. A 2025 study, led by behavioural biologist Stefanie Riemer at the University of Bern, examined 105 highly play-motivated dogs by testing how they reacted when a favourite toy was placed out of reach or locked inside a box next to a food puzzle. Of those dogs, 33 showed patterns consistent with behavioural-addiction criteria: intense fixation on the toy; reduced interest in

other rewards; and persistent efforts to get at it. Some dogs attributed what researchers called "extreme salience" to their toys and craving them even over food or their owners' attention. Riemer suggests it's the play itself, not the toy, that dogs are chasing. Toys become so exciting

because of the intense play they're associated with, in a way that echoes some features of human behavioural addiction. That would help explain why the moment of destruction is often the most electric part of a play session for a dog. It's the payoff of the whole hunting sequence. Interestingly, not all the science suggests toys are purely good for a dog's wellbeing.

A 2023 paper from Barnard College's Dog Cognition Lab found that giving companion dogs new toys produced only a slight, not statistically significant, improvement in welfare measures and no change in eating rate or activity levels — a contrast with earlier findings that toys can meaningfully benefit dogs in shelters or labs. Toys, in other words, may matter more for dogs whose environments are otherwise barren than for pets already living fairly enriched lives.

What to do about the fluff explosion

A few practical takeaways from all this research:

- **It's normal, not a behaviour problem.** A dog who methodically de-stuffs a toy is doing exactly what evolution built it to do.
- **Durability and destructibility serve different needs.** Tough chew toys satisfy jaw and dental needs; soft, 'killable' toys satisfy the predatory-sequence itch. Dogs often want both.
- **Supervise the aftermath.** The real risk isn't the stuffing coming out: it's a dog swallowing it. Squeakers and stuffing can cause dangerous blockages, so it's worth trading a gutted toy for a fresh one before your dog starts eating the evidence.
- **Channel the drive productively.** Puzzle feeders and scent games tap the same search-and-capture instincts in a way that doesn't end in a pile of polyfill.

The next time you find a decapitated stuffed teddy on the rug, know that you're not looking at wanton destruction. You're looking at a few hundred thousand years of predatory instinct, still doing its job, but with significantly lower stakes than it used to have. 🐾

References

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This column represents the author's reflections on her interaction with the dog world and does not necessarily reflect any official position of Dogs New Zealand.