FAQ on the safety of clay-based pet litter

July 2022

The European Bentonite Association (EUBA) is the trade association representing the producers of absorbent clay products, including clay-based pet litter. As the makers of pet care materials, we take any concern that our products might be harmful to pets or their owners seriously.

Our members have interviewed veterinarians, pet store owners and cat owners and produced new studies to investigate if there are health problems that could be directly attributed to the use of clay-based pet litter. **The numerous consultations, interviews and studies conducted over the past decades have demonstrated no link between the use of clay-based pet litter with the sickness or death of any animal.**

As clay-based pet litter producers regularly receive enquiries concerning the safety of the pet litter, a sectorial response is hereby provided to the most frequently asked questions.

Disclaimer: the document considers the properties of the pet litter as placed on the market and does not consider health issues that may be caused by bacteria, viruses or parasites possibly present in the animal's excretions.

1. Is clay-based pet litter toxic?

No, clay-based pet litter is not toxic to pets or humans under normal conditions of use.

The clays used as litter have many applications and can be found in various day-to-day products such as cosmetics, animal feed, paper, fertilisers and are also used in the production of some food products such as oils and wine.

In fact, specific clays are naturally used to reduce the toxicity of certain foods.

2. Is the ingestion of clay-based pet litter dangerous for my pet?

The clumping characteristics of some clays may cause concern to pet owners. The idea that clay particles will stick together or swell and form hard blockages in a pet's intestines is inaccurate. If ingested, the clay particles will simply pass through the pet's system before being excreted.

More so, the clays used as pet litter are authorised in animal nutrition. For example, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) assessed the safety of bentonite as a feed additive. EFSA concluded that bentonites are safe for all animal species, the consumers and the environment when used in complete feed.

The only normal hypothetical entry route would be by licking or small accidental ingestions, on which there is no problem. In case the ingestion is more massive, this is due to behavioural disorders of the animal or by other pets (i.e. dogs that ingest faeces and sand from cats). This conduct should always be avoided and educated by the owner, as it may happen with ingesting any other household item.

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3. Clay-based pet litter may contain “silica”, what does it mean?

Silica refers to a complex group of substances generally classified as crystalline, non-crystalline or amorphous. It is crystalline silica, in the form of particles of respirable size, which IARC has classified as a known human carcinogen. IARC also states that the risk is limited to occupational exposure, meaning only those working in industrial workplaces.

The normal use of pet litter is not an occupational exposure. Extensive research and testing have proven that consumer exposure to respirable crystalline silica during the normal use of clay-based pet litter poses no risk to humans.

4. What evidence supports that crystalline silica in pet litter does not pose a risk?

In 1999 the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) granted a Safe Use Determination (SUD) for the presence of crystalline silica in sorptive mineral-based pet litters. After extensive analysis, OEHHA has determined that there are no adverse health risks associated with the occurrence of crystalline silica in sorptive mineral-based pet litter. A copy of the complete submission for the SUD, including research, may be obtained from OEHHA.

In 2018, EUBA assessed the consumer’s exposure to dust and crystalline silica from handling mineral-based pet litters. Different types of clumping and non-clumping clay-based pet litters placed on the market in the European Union have been analysed. Consideration has been given to the different types of handling by the consumer depending on the litter type.

This study concludes that under the worst possible conditions of use, exposure to crystalline silica from clay-based pet litter is more than 300 times lower than the health-based limit value at the workplace. Therefore, exposure to respirable crystalline silica from handling mineral-based pet litter is negligible and does not raise a health concern for the consumer.

5. What evidence supports that crystalline silica in pet litter does not pose a risk?

In 2018, EUBA assessed the consumer’s exposure to dust and crystalline silica from handling mineral-based pet litters. Different types of clumping and non-clumping clay-based pet litters placed on the market in the European Union have been analysed. Consideration has been given to the different types of handling by the consumer depending on the litter type.

This study shows that exposure to dust is very low for the different handlings of the litter. Therefore, exposure to respirable crystalline silica from handling mineral-based pet litter is negligible and will not raise a health concern for the pet. There are also no known cases of animal diseases due to the inhalation of dust from clay-based pet litter.

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6. What precautions shall you use when handling pet litter?

- Always follow the instructions given by the manufacturer.
- Wash your hands after handling or cleaning litter boxes.
- In general, keep your house clean and vacuum up also near the litter box.
- Keep pet litter out of reach of children and other pets, like any other household product.
- Do not throw waste litter, not faeces, into the toilet.
- Beware of some formats that can be heavyweight when loading.
- In general, animal faeces can be harmful to pregnant women. Thus, avoid any contact with pet faeces, so better not to manage soiled pet litter.
- Store tightly closed in a cool and dry place.

7. How can I reduce the dust generation when preparing a new litter box or disposing of the old one?

- Pour carefully and from a low height, i.e. 15 cm height.
- Choose pet litters with proven quality and/or dedusted pet litters.

8. How to safely dispose of used litter?

- Disposal via household waste is recommended as described on the packaging. This applies to used litter, faeces or excrement present in the used litter.
- Another disposal option is the specific bin offered in many municipalities and thus the large-scale composting. Where regionally permitted, you can also dispose of litter and unused granules via offered organic bin.
- Important Notice: Never flush into the toilet! The mineral has a high water binding capacity and will form big clumps, which can immediately block the wastewater lines.

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