To ‘nip or not to ‘nip—that is the question.

’Tis nobler for kitty owners to follow the dictum of “just say no,” or to grant their pets the occasional sniff of medicinal herbs and, in so doing, liven up their lives?

While some might hesitate to let their cats experiment, experts agree that, for the majority of felines, there’s nothing to ponder: Life is much more interesting with catnip.

A member of the mint family, *Nepeta cataria* contains nepetalactone, a chemical that takes cats to their crazy place. Scientists don’t know exactly how catnip acts on the feline brain, but they theorize that nepetalactone mimics cats’ “happy” pheromones and stimulates the corresponding neural receptors.

The resulting effects are well-known: A few whiffs can make even the laziest kitty couch potato roll, rub, flip, race around the house, drool, and generally lose his dignity.

Catnip revs up almost every cat species, from 400-pound lions to pint-sized sand cats. Tigers seem to be resistant—and not every domestic cat responds. It takes a while for kittens to acquire the taste; an estimated 20 to 30 percent never do.

Catnip sensitivity is hereditary, and if a cat doesn’t possess a genetic predilection for the herb, he will forever turn up his nose. It’s not that he can’t smell it; it simply does nothing for him. Three-year-old Huxley, a brown tabby who lives with Rhonda Donald in Washington, N.C., seems to be one of the immune. “He doesn’t give a poop about it,” says Donald. “He’ll sniff it and maybe bat at it a little, then walk away. Or sit on it like it’s not there.”

Cubsy, a white cat in Los Angeles, Calif., has the catnip gene. When ‘nip time rolls around, he waits expectantly while owner Maria Aguilar sprinkles his favorite blend on the floor. He sniffs it, nibbles it, and flops down, rolling from side to side and rubbing his cheeks in the stuff—the epitome of cat nirvana.

For cats blessed with an affinity for the plant, it can provide variety and stimulation, says Beth Adelman, a New York City cat behavior consultant. And if your pet is stressed, catnip may help him relax. The staff of the Cat Care Society in Lakewood, Colo., finds that it can pacify an angry cat or bring a shy one out of his shell; caregivers at the SPCA Serving Erie County in Tonawanda, N.Y., use it to encourage stressed-out kitties to eat.

But before you start thinking of the
herb as a panacea for all that might ail your kitty, you need to know how your cat takes his catnip—and how he reacts to it.

Cats get the “catnip crazies” when they sniff the dried plant and inhale the oils, but eating it has a sedative effect. 'Nipper madness can take a few forms—the drooling fool who rubs himself in it and squints his eyes in delight; the possessed creature who claws the rug, disimbowels his toy, and tears around the house; and the occasional ‘nipper tripper who becomes hyped up and territorial, swatting and growling at anyone who tries to get near. After the initial reaction, most cats mellow out for a while, staring blissfully into space.

Judy Miller’s two cats love catnip—maybe a little too much. “There's drama if I don’t put two piles of catnip down fast enough,” says the Cambridge, Mass., resident. Cleo likes to chow down on her pile, while Lily is a roller and a rubber—and a growler. “If Cleo tries to eat Lily’s catnip, Lily growls and swats at her. And Cleo is usually the dominant one.”

A cat’s body language will provide clues as to whether she’s enjoying the experience. “You can usually tell if your cat is overstimulated by her body posture, especially the position of the ears,” says veterinarian Brenda Griffin, an adjunct associate professor of shelter medicine at the University of Florida. “They will flatten and rotate sideways—airplane ears.” If you see this reaction, Griffin says, stand clear for a bit, just in case your cat mistakes you for a toy.

If your feline friend does get overstimulated, you don’t have to deprive him completely. “Just don’t try to pet him or pick him up during his catnip experience,” advises Adelman. (You can also give him his catnip in a separate room, along with a toy to destroy.)

A catnip episode typically lasts 5 to 10 minutes, after which the cat loses interest. Offering more catnip won’t work; it takes up to an hour or two for her to “reset” and become susceptible again. And the novelty can wear off if she is exposed too often—so don’t overdo the revelry.