

YUCK! MY DOG EATS POOP!

Yuck! Why does my dog eat poop?

Although it's gross, coprophagia (medical term for stool eating) is not an abnormal behavior for canines in certain situations. Nursing mothers naturally consume their own pup's feces, presumably to keep the nest clean. This behavior provides a survival benefit as it prevents unhygienic conditions from developing in the nest, which could lead to disease.

Many puppies go through an oral stage in which they explore everything with their mouths, sometimes ingesting a variety of non-food items, including feces. As they get older, most pups learn that food tastes better than feces and stop eating their (or other dogs') stool, usually outgrowing the habit after the first year.

Variations on the coprophagia theme

There are several different forms of coprophagy but, whatever form it takes, there are probably similar drives and predilections operating. Variations on the theme include:

- Dogs that eat only their own stool
- Dogs that eat only other dogs' stool
- Dogs that eat stool only in the winter if it is frozen solid (poopsicles)
- Dogs that eat only the stool of other species, often cats

Some possible reasons for coprophagia

1. If your dog is being under fed, he may still be hungry, which may lead to stool eating.
2. If your dog is being fed a poor-quality food, he could be suffering from malnutrition and/or vitamin and mineral deficiencies which could cause him to eat things in addition to his regular diet (such as his own stool).
3. If your dog is being fed too many treats during the day, he may be too full to complete his balanced daily meals, which could lead to malnutrition and/or vitamin and mineral deficiencies and an increased appetite at varying times of the day.
4. If your dog has a medical problem that causes a decrease in the absorption of nutrients or causes gastrointestinal upset, the dog may resort to stool eating.
5. If the dog's stool contains large amounts of undigested food materials, there is an increased likelihood that the stool will be eaten. This is seen in dogs that have any type of medical condition that leads to poor digestion of their food.
6. If the dog has a medical problem or is taking medication for a problem which causes an increase in appetite, the dog may resort in stool eating. Some examples might be: diabetes, Cushing's disease, thyroid disease, or any treatment involving steroids.
7. Your dog may eat his stool if he is being kept in too small an area. Frequently, people do not clean out their dog runs often enough and the feces gather up in this area: this can become stressful for the dog.
8. Even in a large area, if the stools are not being picked up quickly enough, this can lead to stool eating.
9. If your dog is bored and does not have anything else to stimulate him, he might investigate his feces out of boredom, begin playing with it and then possibly start eating it.

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Managing the problem with positive reinforcement training

- It's important that you can accurately predict when your dog is going to poop, so keep a "poop log" to determine his schedule. Most dogs defecate the number of times they are fed plus one, and have a fairly predictable poop schedule.
- Once you know when your dog is likely to poop, observe him doing so. At the first indication of stool sniffing or investigation after he defecates, interrupt (don't scare) your dog and ask him to perform some obedience cue you're sure he can do (like sit) and reward him with a treat he really likes. After about 2 weeks of observing your dog for 30 minutes before and 30 minutes after the regularly scheduled poop time and substituting a positive experience (sit + treat), you should be able to ease up on the "training".
- Don't let your dog see you picking up poop; this will draw attention to the very thing you want him to avoid and he may interpret it as an interactive game.
- As with all other unwanted behaviors, consistency plays a huge role in effective treatment. Since coprophagia is a self-rewarding behavior for a dog, he will not miss an opportunity to engage in the behavior if the opportunity presents itself.

If positive reinforcement methods alone don't work, try the following:

- Change the dog's diet and feeding schedule so that high fiber rations are fed frequently and perhaps by free choice. Hill's r/d Prescription Diet®, a diet that contains 10 percent fiber, is a good option. It may work by allowing the dog to eat to satiation without gaining weight, or it may alter the texture of the dog's stool, making it less palatable. Dry food seems more effective than wet food in curtailing coprophagia.
- Lifestyle enrichment is also helpful. Make sure your dog has plenty of exercise and spends plenty of quality time with you each day. Some dogs respond when a "get a job" program is implemented. Such a program is designed to encourage the dog to exercise his natural tendencies by means of activities like chasing, fetching, walking, pseudo-hunting, fly ball, agility training, etc.

Although some of the above measures have occasionally been found effective on their own, it best to apply a whole program of prevention (exercise, diet, and supervised outdoor excursions) for at least six months to nip the behavior in the bud. If during this time the dog gets access to stool and ingests it, some ground will be lost. Hopefully, though, progress will eventually be made, even if it's one step back for every two forward.

Despite all these modifications in environment and training, some dogs persist in the habit of coprophagia. For these dogs, the compulsive disorder diagnosis may be worth considering. Some obstinate cases respond to the judicious use of anti-depressants.

Check with your vet before beginning any management programs for coprophagia in order to rule out medical reasons for the behavior.