

Why Dogs Eat Poop and How To Stop It

By Staff Writers | July 01, 2015

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Of all the repulsive habits our canine companions have—drinking from the toilet, rolling in swamp muck, licking their butts—nothing tops the disgusting practice of eating poop. Their motivation may not be to gross us humans out, but it certainly does. So much so, in fact, that poop eating is often a reason people try to rehome a dog or even opt for euthanasia.

There's a scientific name for this habit—coprophagia (kop-ruh-fey-jee-uh)—and also both behavioral and physiologic reasons why some dogs view dung as a delicacy.



If you have a poop eater, don't despair. There are ways to discourage the habit.

Although not deeply probed by science—there are few studies on it—poop eating is a relatively common phenomenon. In a 2012 study presented at the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior annual conference, researchers led by Dr. Benjamin Hart, from the University of California, Davis, found that:

- 16 percent (one in six) of dogs are classified as “serious” stool eaters, which means that they were caught in the act five times.
- 24 percent of the dogs in the study (one in four) were observed eating feces at least once.

Hart wrote, “Our conclusion is that eating of fresh stools is a reflection of an innate predisposition of ancestral canids living

in nature that protects pack members from intestinal parasites present in feces that could occasionally be dropped in the den/rest area.” His study consisted of two separate surveys sent to about 3,000 dog owners.

While it is repulsive to human sensibilities, it's not really all that bad from a canine point of view. Dogs evolved as scavengers, eating whatever they found on the ground or in the trash heap, so their ideas of haute cuisine is somewhat different from ours. In his Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training, animal behaviorist Steven R. Lindsay says, that coprophagia “may be one of several appetitive survival behaviors that have evolved to cope with the periodic adversity of starvation.” In other words, when food is scarce, you can't be picky.

Poop Eating is Normal For Mothers and Pups

For some species, such as rabbits, eating fecal droppings is a totally normal way of obtaining key nutrients. In fact, if you prevent rabbits from doing this, they will develop health problems, and young ones will fail to thrive.

Fortunately, dogs do not need to get nutrients in this manner.

It is, however, a normal, natural behavior at some canine life stages. Mother dogs will lick their puppies to urge them to eliminate, and clean their feces, for about the first three weeks. Puppies will also naturally engage in this behavior, eating both their own fecal droppings (known as autocoprophagia), and those of other dogs (allocoprophagia), as well as cats and other animals. Some dogs find horse manure and goose droppings particularly appealing.

Eating their own poop is harmless, but consuming that of other animals may cause health problems if the stool is contaminated with parasites, viruses, or toxins. In most cases, this behavior will fade before the puppy is about nine months old.

Some Facts About Dogs Who Eat Poop

When it occurs in puppies, coprophagia is generally considered part of the process of exploring the world around them. Most will be satisfied with a sniff, but a few will want, like human children, to put everything in their mouths. One bizarre fact: Dogs will rarely eat soft, poorly formed stools or diarrhea. They appear to be attracted most to hard stools. Frozen ones, in

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particular, are gulped down with relish. There is a reason why dog owners have coined the term, “poopsicle.”

In his study, Hart made some other observations about why dogs eat poop:

- Coprophagia was more common in multi-dog households. In single-dog homes, only 20 percent of dogs had the habit, while in homes with three dogs, that rose to 33 percent.
- Poop eaters are no harder to house train than any other dogs.
- Females are more likely to eat poop, and intact males were least likely.
- 92 percent of poop eaters want fresh stuff, only one to two days old.
- 85 percent of poop eaters will not eat their own feces, only that of other dogs.
- Greedy eaters—dogs who steal food off tables—tend to also be poop eaters.

Why Do Dogs Eat Poop?

If your adult dog starts to dine on dung, you should consult with your vet to rule out such health problems as:

- **parasites**
- diets deficient in nutrients and calories
- malabsorption syndromes
- diabetes, Cushing’s, thyroid disease, and other conditions that might cause an increase in appetite
- drugs, such as steroids

In many cases, dogs start to eat their own poop because of some kind of environmental stress or behavioral triggers, including:

- **Isolation:** Studies have shown that dogs who are kept alone in kennels or basements are more likely to eat poop than those dogs who live close to their people.
- **Restrictive confinement:** Spending too much time confined in a small spaces can cause the problem. It’s not unusual to see coprophagia in dogs rescued from crowded shelters.
- **Anxiety:** often a result of a person using punishment or harsh methods during **housetraining**. According to this theory, dogs may eliminate and then eat their own poop to get rid of the evidence, but then they are punished more. It becomes a vicious cycle.
- **Attention-seeking:** Dogs eat their own poop to get a reaction from their humans, which they inevitably will. So if you see your dog doing this, don’t overreact.
- **Inappropriate association with real food:** Dogs who are fed in close proximity to their feces may make a connection between the odors of food and those of poop and will be unable to tell the difference.
- **Scenting it on their mothers:** Lindsay writes that in some cases, puppies will get confused by sniffing fecal odors on their mother’s breath after she has cleaned them. Also,

sometimes mothers may regurgitate food that is mixed with puppy fecal matter. He calls this an “appetitive inoculation,” which may set a puppy up to develop this bad habit.

- **Living with a sick or elderly dog:** Sometimes a healthy dog will consume stools from a weaker canine member of the household, especially in cases of fecal incontinence. Scientists hypothesize that this may be related to the instinct to protect the pack from predators.

How to Stop Your Dog From Eating Poop

Veterinarians and dog owners have seen improvements with a handful of strategies, including:

- **Vitamin supplementation:** There’s been a long-standing theory that dogs eat feces because they are missing something in their diets. Vitamin-B deficiency, in particular, has been a prime suspect, and studies have backed this up. In 1981, scientists showed fecal microbial activity synthesized thiamine, a B-vitamin. Other research found other missing nutrients.
- **Enzyme supplementation:** The modern canine diet is higher in carbohydrates and lower in meat-based proteins and fats than the canine ancestral diet. Some people have had success with a meat tenderizer that contains papain, an enzyme.
- **Taste-aversion products:** The theory is that certain tastes and smells are as disgusting to dogs as the idea of stool eating is to us and that spraying certain substances on poop will make it less appealing. Many of these products contain monosodium glutamate, chamomile, pepper-plant derivatives, yucca, garlic, and parsley.

Perhaps the best way to stop the problem is through training and environmental management methods, including:

- **Keep the dog’s living area clean**, including the yard, so there will be no poops for him to pick up.
- Cat owners **should keep that litter box clean or out of the dog’s reach**.
- **Supervise your dog on walks**, and pick up after him immediately.
- Training. **Work hard on the commands** “leave it” and “come.” One simple exercise, suggested by *Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB* and Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB, is to teach your dog to come to you for a food treat as soon as he has eliminated. That way, the dog will develop a habit to run to you for a tasty tidbit, instead of reaching for the revolting recyclable on the the ground.

Sources: *Applied Dog Behavior and Training*, by Steven R. Lindsay; “Coprophagia in Dogs—Behavior,” VCA Animal Hospitals fact sheet; “Coprophagia: The Scoop on Poop Eating in Dogs,” Dr. Sophia Yin fact sheet