

## **Eating Dog Feces**

### **Canine Behavior Series**

"My dog eats his own poop!" exclaims the shocked human family member of an otherwise-perfect canine. Or, embarrassed to come right out with it, the human says, "I need to ask about this thing my dog does. It's really strange and disgusting..." The average person doesn't seem to discuss poop-eating dogs with friends and family, so people don't realize it's a common dog behavior.

### **Natural Behavior**

Mother dogs clean their nursing puppies and eat the feces. With pups in the nest, you can imagine the unhealthy situation that would result from the waste being allowed to accumulate. Cats perform this task for their kittens, too. Other adult dogs in the family sometimes take over motherly duties in times of need, such as a litter too large for the mother or a mother who is ill or dies. False pregnancies are normal in intact female dogs, and female dogs tend to cycle on the same schedule with other females in the same household. Other females who are in false pregnancy are often well equipped to mother some or all of the pups in another female's litter. You can see that eating dog feces is not at all an unusual behavior for dogs. When the pups start eating solid food and walking well enough to get out of the nest to poop, mom can stop the cleaning duty. But the habit can certainly persist in her, and the hard-wired instinct probably exists in most dogs, ready to be triggered by various life situations.

### **Triggers**

Sometimes we don't know why a particular dog starts eating poop, but certain conditions can trigger the behavior. Since some of these indicate a dog who needs help, you'll want to consider them as possibilities for what is going on with your dog.

1. A dog with a physical problem that causes excessive hunger, pain, or other sensations may resort to eating feces. If your adult dog who has not previously had this habit suddenly develops it, take the dog to your veterinarian for a check-up.
2. A dog who is not getting enough to eat or is going too long between meals may eat feces. Your veterinarian can help you evaluate the dog's weight and can suggest a feeding schedule and amount. Sometimes it takes experimentation to see what works best for a particular dog.
3. A dog with intestinal parasites or other condition that creates blood or other fecal changes may eat feces. One dog may eat the feces of another dog who is shedding something like this in the stools. A fresh fecal specimen to your veterinarian for evaluation can detect some of these problems.
4. Sometimes a change of diet helps. There doesn't seem to be any one food that is right for all dogs, and your dog may need something different than you're currently feeding. Be sure to make any changes of diet gradual, mixing the new food in with the old over a period of several days or weeks, to give the dog's intestines time to adjust and avoid diarrhea from the change.
5. Some dogs develop a mental connection that they will be punished if their humans find them in the same room with feces. Dogs react to this fearful situation in various ways, and one way is to eat the feces so it will not be there to make the human angry. This is one of many reasons not to use punishment when housetraining a dog.
6. Boredom can cause dogs to do all sorts of things, including eat feces. Interesting toys that have treats inside them for the dog to get out can help with lots of boredom-based problems.
7. Dogs may do just about any wild thing when suffering from separation anxiety. If that is the problem, this won't be the only symptom, and you'll want to help your dog work through the separation anxiety.

### **Sanitation**

The number-one thing you can do to help overcome feces eating is to keep your dog's area clean of feces. This means housetraining, and supervising the dog whenever the dog is in the designated relief area. It's obviously not healthy for dogs to eat feces, and preventing the dog from carrying out the habit is also basic to getting the habit to fade. It's not healthy for humans or dogs to have the feces lying around, either. Until a dog is fully housetrained and the feces-

eating habit has died out, picking up after each bowel movement is an important tactic. After the dog's habits are steady, you may be able to pick up just once a day if you have a private place for the dog to use.

### **Food Additives**

Some people swear by food additives to stop a dog from eating feces. Sometimes the theory is that the additive provides a nutrient the dog is seeking when eating feces and thus the dog will no longer crave feces. Other times the theory is that the additive makes the feces taste bad and the dog will not want it. Before you try adding any of these things to your dog's food, consult your veterinarian about whether the particular additive is safe for your particular dog. Don't expect any additive to be a miracle cure. These things tend to work for the occasional dog, but chances are pretty good that your dog won't be the one.

### **Bait and Switch**

While you're hanging out with your dog to supervise, you can hurry the process of fading out the feces-eating habit with a simple and pleasant training technique. The tools you'll need are a collar or head halter for the dog, a leash, and small treats your dog values highly. If your dog is easily handled, the collar will do. If the dog is extremely determined to eat the poop, extremely fast or strong, have a behavior specialist fit your dog with the correct size head halter, introduce your dog to it gently, and give you one or more lessons on how to use the head halter safely and effectively. It gives you more control over the dog's mouth than a collar, and if your particular dog needs it for this training you'll be glad to have the skill for other training situations, too. Take your dog out to potty on leash. As soon as the poop hits the ground and the dog shows interest in it, call the dog to you. Use the leash not to jerk the dog, but simply to keep the dog from being able to reach the feces. Keep the treats out of sight. The instant the dog reaches you, praise the dog, whip out a treat and give it. Then back away from the dog, praise and give another treat for coming to you, and repeat that for a total of three to five times. At this point you have really taken the dog's mind off the feces. Go on indoors with the dog and come back out without the dog to clean up. Once you have good control and a good rapport with the dog, you can go ahead and clean up while the dog is still outside. As you set this habit more strongly through repetition, you will be able to do the bait-and-switch with the dog on a long line, coming to you at the back door for a treat. Eventually you'll be able to do bait-and-switch without a leash or line on the dog. Keep up the same energy and level of reward, if you want the dog to keep responding!

### **Talk about It**

After the dog has been prevented from eating feces for a considerable length of time, the habit tends to fade. That makes supervising the dog and working on this in the positive, bait-and-switch way very worth your while. Start the intervention as soon as you notice the dog eating feces, because the less time a habit has been going on, the more easily it will fade.

Help your friends and family by talking about this problem. You'll help their dogs in the process, too, because some people try punishment to break the habit. As you know now, that doesn't work, and it's destructive to the dog's trust in people and to the family's relationship with their dog. Let's bring this "dirty little secret" out into the open. *Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book [Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others](#)*. Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.