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Tail chasing in dogs causes.

Tail chasing, at first glance, may appear to be a normal component of play behaviour in dogs.

Problems arise when such behaviour becomes excessive and the dog injures itself during the activity and when the dog cannot be distracted for other activities.

Many would define tail chasing, or whirling, as a stereotypic behavior.

Stereotypic behavior can be defined as a ritualistic, repetitive, constant sequence of movements appearing to serve no obvious function.

Such behavior is often found;

where dogs are confined

where their behavior is restricted

can be present in ordinary environments, as well.

Why does tail chasing occur?

The primary causes of excessive tail chasing often involve;
aspects of learned behavior
medical problems or both.

Behavioral causes;

Attention-seeking, boredom, anxiety.

Tail chasing and other stereotypic behaviors may be a result of operant conditioning, a process by which a behavior is affected by its consequences and an association is made between a stimulus and a response.

Because dogs are social animals, attention from the owner is often a positive reinforce *causing an increase in the frequency of the performed behavior whether the owner intends this or not.*

Even aversive attention may act as a positive reinforcer of the behavior, especially when the animal receives little owner attention in the first place. In this case, any attention the dog receives is highly rewarding. This type of behavior is known as "attention-seeking behavior".

Boredom is another postulated cause of some stereotypies, but an unlikely one. A diagnosis of boredom as a cause of stereotypic behaviour can be incorrectly assumed. In fact the animal may simply have a greater need for aerobic exercise and will cease energy consuming stereotypic behaviour when activity is normal. It is not boredom per se that is the problem, but lack of exercise.

Anxiety syndrome -In addition, some dogs with anxiety may chase their tail as well. This anxiety may be in response to some sort of stimulus or it may be nonspecific.

Due to injury - Sometimes if a dog has had a previous injury, physical injury or irritation to an extremity, it may start chasing that region when it becomes aware of it. Such dogs are usually neurologically normal.

Medical causes;

Neurological.

In addition to the behavioral conditions mentioned above, neurological conditions can also cause behaviors such as whirling.

Psychomotor epilepsy has been attributed to severe tail chasing and sometimes described as a seizure-related problem.

There is also evidence that stereotyped behavior depends upon the dopamine systems involved in the control of movement.

Dopamine turnover is increased in animals with stereotypies.

This becomes important when drug treatment is to be considered.

As well, there is a possibility that these behaviors may cause a release of endogenous opioids which stimulate the pleasure centers of the brain and protect the animal from perception of pain in more severe cases involving self-mutilation.

In Bull & Terriers breeds that has been historically associated with dog fighting, it has been “speculated” that there may be a reduced pain perception, genetically passed on as an adaptation from the fighting generations.

(Additional information on these neurological theories are discussed in the references cited at the end of this article).

A variety of superficial or peripheral conditions involving pain, irritation, or other sensations in the tail or hindquarters may also trigger tail chasing. Such conditions normally, however not exclusively, involve injury or disease to the skin and/or peripheral nervous system.