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Dog behavior.About coprophagia (poop-eating).

By Dr. Becker

- Dogs don't engage in coprophagia (poop-eating) because they like the taste or to gross out their owners.
- Many dogs could just sample poop in an effort to correct a digestive insufficiency or microbiome imbalance.
- Dogs fed a biologically inappropriate dry diet are more often poop eaters than dogs fed a nutritionally balanced, fresh and human-grade diet or raw diets.
- Sometimes coprophagia is behavioral in nature, especially among puppy yard dogs and dogs living in kennel situations.
- If your dog is a poop eater, one of the most effective ways to curb the behavior is to simply clean up after him as soon as he eliminates.

Then supervise him in situations where he could encounter the feces of other pets or wildlife.

If and when your dog does the unthinkable and samples some poop, it's best to try to keep an open mind (while also trying to keep your lunch down).

Jacob Brogan, writing for Smithsonian.com:

"... More often than not, when animals engage in this behavior, they're not trying not to repulse us — but to communicate something vital about their health and biology."

The scientific name for "this behavior" is coprophagia.

Beyond the disgust factor, many dog owners dog who catch their dog in the act leap to the conclusion there's something wrong with their dog.

"In fact, even when coprophagia does suggest that there's something wrong with a dog, they're often engaging in it because they're trying to make things right, not because they're fundamentally broken."

Some dogs start eating poop because their bodies are prodding them to correct an insufficiency or imbalance in the digestive process.

Perhaps the pancreas isn't producing enough insulin or other enzymes, for example, or maybe the balance of good-to-bad gut bacteria is out of whack.

Dogs don't eat poop because they think it's yummy, but rather because their bodies are urging them to ingest something present in the feces — something that may be missing from their diet.

In my experience, coprophagia is more prevalent in dogs fed commercial dry feeds which is a biologically inappropriate diet that can create a chronic digestive enzyme deficiency.

Since the feces of other animals are a good source of digestive enzymes, dogs with a deficiency will sometimes ingest enzyme-rich poop and some will roll in it.

In fact, rabbit poop is a very rich source of not only enzymes, but also B vitamins, which is why many dogs, given the opportunity, will happily scarf up rabbit droppings if they are exposed to it.

Most poop-eating dogs limit themselves to fresh feces (less than two days old), probably because in addition to digestive enzymes, it also contains the high levels of microbes necessary to regenerate beneficial bacteria in the gut – see article on this website about microbes.

Other species also eat faeces.

If your dog partakes of the occasional poop snack, it might make you feel better to know they got plenty of company.

Many species eat feces, including mice and the capybara, the largest rodent in the world.

Behavioral causes of coprophagia in dogs.

Some dogs, especially those in kennel situations, may eat poop because they're feeling anxious or stressed.

Research also suggests dogs who are punished for inappropriate elimination can convince themselves pooping itself is bad, so they hide the evidence by eating it.

Coprophagia is also a problem in a kennel situation.

Puppies who go hungry, are weaned too soon, have to fight with others for food or are forced to sit for weeks in a small crate with no physical or mental stimulation, are at high risk of becoming habitual stool eaters.

Coprophagia can also be a learned behavior.

Older dogs can actually role model poop-eating behavior for younger dogs in the household – younger dogs will be inquisitive and also partake if the example is there to follow.

Some dogs are feces connoisseurs who are quite selective about the poop they are willing to eat.

Some favor only poopsicles (frozen poop); others will eat only the feces of a particular animal and some dogs only indulge their habit at certain times of the year!

5 ways to help curb your dog's nasty habit.

1. Feed a nutritionally balanced diet containing human-grade (preferably unprocessed) protein and supplement with probiotics and digestive enzymes to help curb your dog's urge to find less appetizing sources of free enzymes around the yard.
2. Pick up your dog's feces immediately, or as soon after she eliminates as possible burst more than once a day.
3. Keep your dog away from other animal faeces.
4. Make sure your dog has toys that stimulate their brain and alleviate boredom.

Also insure the dog is well-exercised.

Bored, sedentary dogs tend to develop far stranger behaviors and habits than dogs who get plenty of exercise and mental stimulation.

5. If that's the way you want to go consider experimenting with some of the over-the-counter coprophagia deterrent products.

Make sure you look for a non-toxic product that doesn't contain monosodium glutamate (MSG).

If despite your best efforts your dog's poop-eating behavior isn't improving, or is getting worse, it's recommended making an appointment with your veterinarian to rule out any underlying medical reason for the behavior.

Interestingly, microbiome restorative therapy can be very successful for owners who have tried everything to curb this gross habit.

Fast facts about poop-eating behavior.

Researchers at the University of California (UC), Davis conducted an Internet survey of 1,500 dog owners to learn more about coprophagia in dogs.

The survey results revealed that:

1. 16 % of dogs eat stools frequently and 85% eat other dogs' poop
2. Intact males are less likely to indulge than neutered dogs of either sex
3. Poop eaters are more likely to live with other dogs and are greedy eaters
4. 90% of stools were eaten within two days

The researchers also found that food additives are only effective as a deterrent from 0 to 2% of the time, nor is punishment effective.

Also ineffective were electronic collars and reward-based reinforcement like clicker training.

The best solution is to supervise and clean up after your dog.