

Coprophagia

Although stool eating may seem like a disgusting habit it's actually a normal canine behaviour and is common in ten percent of all dogs. Most dogs that eat stool are in good health and are not nutrient deficient. This means in these cases, the stool eating is behavioural.

A dog eating its own stool may be in no danger however, if it eats the stool of another dog with worms or a contagious disease, it could get sick. Eating large amounts of horse feces can cause severe vomiting and diarrhea. If the dog eats the feces of a large animal recently wormed it could become toxic from the worming medication in the stool.

Physical Causes

If a dog is not getting enough food it may attempt to satisfy its hunger by eating stool. If a dog is over fed it may be unable to absorb enough nutrients causing it to eat the food a second time in order to benefit from the nutrients still in the stool.

It's also believed that some dogs may eat stool if they have parasites or aren't getting enough nutrients such as vitamin B. Dogs that are on corticosteroid therapy may eat stool as well as dogs with pancreas issues, intestinal infections, Cushings disease, Malabsorptive syndrome, Diabetes Mellitus and Hyperthyroidism.

Behavioural Causes

Mothers eat the feces of their young until they're able to leave the den to eliminate. It's an innate behaviour to keep the den clean and a survival instinct to prevent scents that may attract predators. The pups may also learn to mimic the behaviour of the mother. Because puppies investigate everything with their mouths as a child would with its hands, puppies often outgrow stool eating as they develop distaste for stool.

If a dog is forced to live in its own excrements it may eat the stool in order to keep its den clean.

Dogs are scavengers by nature. A hungry dog is more likely to eat feces and some dogs simply like the taste. Because dogs eat different types of food, a dog may prefer the stool of one dog over that of another due to odor and flavour.

Wild dogs will eat one another's feces in order to maintain the same antibodies in their systems to prevent the pack from being wiped out by disease.

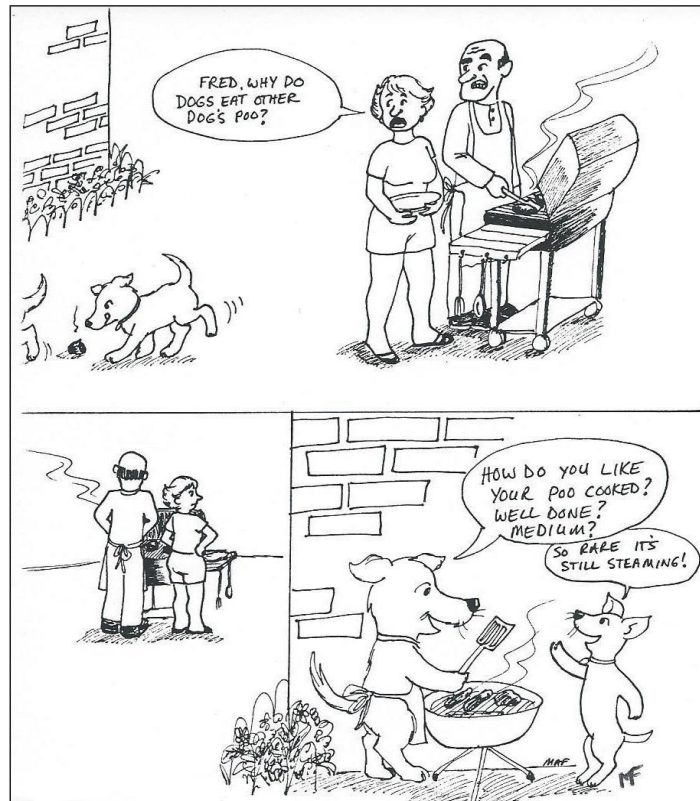
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A dog that's punished for eating stool may associate the stool with punishment and eat the stool to eliminate the cause of the unpleasant experience.

Because dogs mimic their guardian's behaviours, your dog may eat feces after watching you pick up after it. They can also learn to mimic the behaviour of other dogs.

Lonely or bored dogs may focus on stool to simply pass the time. This behaviour can also be caused by stress or anxiety.

Many dogs will eat stool as an attention getting behaviour when they realize you won't ignore the behaviour. In these cases it's important to make sure all your dog's basic needs are being met.



Cartoon by Margaret Ann Frank

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Solutions

- Vet Visit – Take your dog to the vet for a checkup to eliminate the possibility of physical causes.
- Diet – Make sure your dog is on a natural, balanced and nutritious diet and ensure it's getting the correct amount of food to meet its needs.
- Basic Needs – Make sure your dog's basic needs are being met including providing sufficient exercise, mental stimulation and quality time with you and other dogs if possible. (See *"Meeting Your Dog's Basic Needs"* handout)
- Reduce Stress – Create a living environment for you and your dog that's as stress free as possible.
- Positive Reinforcement Training – If you're punishing your dog for behaviour problems it will increase stress for your dog, which could increase stool eating. Change all unwanted behaviour with a positive reinforcement program. Teach your dog to come and sit for a treat immediately after defecating. This prevents your dog from turning and eating the feces and gives you the opportunity to pick it up.
- Environment Management – Manage the environment by making sure stool is picked up immediately after your dog eliminates and make sure cat litter boxes are not accessible.
- Chew Options – Provide a variety of aromatic chew options that will be more enticing than the stool.
- Canned Food – Some believe that satisfying the dog's inclination for soft food will solve this problem.
- Supervise – Supervise your dog when it goes out to eliminate. This enables you to pick up after your dog and teach it when it makes mistakes.
- Passive Training – If the stool is picked up immediately making it impossible for your dog to eat the stool, the behaviour may be eliminated over time through passive training. Passive training means the waning of a particular behaviour due to lack of reinforcement.

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- Leave It – Discourage stool eating with your “leave it” cue. A dog always sniffs before eating. Teach your dog the “leave it” cue and instruct it to move away from its feces as it approaches. (See the “*Leave It*” handout)
- Interrupt and re-direct – Interrupt your dog when it approaches the stool and re-direct it to something else of interest. Over time your dog gets into the habit of engaging in the new behaviour instead of focusing on the stool.
- Trouble Shoot – Create set-ups to practice your “leave it” cue. Use a leash to prevent your dog from eating the stool if necessary.
- Supplements – Some have reported success by adding various supplements to the dog’s food. Some of these supplements include: B-complex vitamins, crushed pineapple, Forbid, glutamic acid, meat tenderizer, Prozyme, rabbit pellets, sauerkraut, sulfur and Viokase. Consult your holistic vet before adding any supplements to your dog’s diet as some may cause adverse side effects.

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