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Canine Mounting: An Overview

Clients are often embarrassed to discuss certain canine behaviors, including mounting. When the subject does arise, what key information should be covered?

Veterinarians often must discuss certain topics that can make clients uncomfortable, including their dog's elimination habits or mounting behaviors. However, unlike elimination, many dog owners do not consider "humping" or mounting (the preferred term) as normal or acceptable.

Often dog owners assume that mounting behavior is sexual in nature and will cease once the pet has been neutered. They then become concerned when their dog continues its mounting behavior, particularly around young children in the household or visitors.

Another assumption is that mounting is a dominance gesture. Mounting may sometimes be sexually based or may signal a dominant-subordinate relationship. But like many other behaviors, mounting can be attributed to various motivations that cannot be identified without observing the events surrounding the activity.

Without knowing the context of a behavior, sometimes it is impossible to ascribe a motivation to that behavior.

REASONS FOR MOUNTING

Anxiety/Arousal

Anxiety or arousal is probably the main reason pet dogs engage in mounting behavior, especially if the dog is mounting objects or people. Mounting is a form of displacement behavior, that is, a behavior that occurs out of context in response to an internal emotional conflict.

Sometimes dogs mount an object as displacement behavior if an event has excited them (eg, playing with a new toy). In other instances, dogs mount a person (eg, visitor) because they are unsure of how to interact with them. Mounting can be considered an outlet for the dog's emotional arousal, relieving tensions that spur a response to an event or visitor.

There can also be an attention-seeking component to the mounting behavior; mounting the visitor may be an outlet for the dog's excitement but it also draws immediate attention to the dog, satisfying that need as well.

5 BASIC MOTIVATIONS FOR MOUNTING BEHAVIOR

1. Anxiety/arousal
2. Sexual
3. Dominance
4. Play
5. Self-soothing

Displacement Behavior: A Classic Example

A textbook example of displacement behavior is a bird that can see seeds on the other side of a pane of glass but cannot access the seeds. In its frustration, the bird starts preening its feathers. Even though the bird still wants the seeds, it responds to being denied access to the food by grooming and preening.

CONTINUES

What to Do About Mounting

As with other problem behaviors (ie, normal behaviors that do not indicate poor quality of life) and behavior problems (ie, signs of mental distress), veterinarians can take different approaches, depending on the owner and the dog.

- If mounting is new behavior, rule out possible physical causes (eg, urinary tract disease, dermatitis, changes in hormonal status).

- Simply understanding the reason their dog is engaged in mounting activities might be sufficient for some owners, as long as the behavior is occasional, self-limited, and not harmful.

- One approach involves redirecting the mounting behavior to a more appropriate target (such as an object) rather than a visitor or another dog. Redirecting is often the least stressful option.

- Avoidance is another approach: If the dog is not placed in situations that lead to the behavior, then the behavior will not occur. This is a good tactic to implement when dogs that are not in the same household engage in mounting activities (eg, at dog parks). It is the least disturbing solution that maintains human social order and prevents mounting from progressing to more aggressive behavior.

- Another alternative is to look for duration, frequency, and antecedents to the mounting behavior. Avoid situations that lead to mounting and use behavior modification techniques, such as desensitization and counterconditioning, especially when mounting is a sign of anxiety or emotional conflict.

- Although as discussed, castration will not eliminate mounting, it may reduce mounting behavior by 50% in almost 70% of dogs, regardless of age at castration.² In about 25% of dogs, there is a great likelihood (90% chance) that reduction in marking behavior also will occur after castration.



Finally, mounting can be an anxiety response to punishment. For example, a dog may be experiencing anxiety secondary to a scolding it just received for getting into trash several hours earlier. The owner's anger is meaningless to the dog, as trash picking is not an immediate event. However, the scolding is a source of anxiety that may need an outlet—a displacement behavior in the form of mounting.

Sexual

Some mounting behaviors are sexual in nature, as male dogs and bitches (both neutered and intact) can continue to engage in sexual behaviors.

Although they may be driven by testosterone, male sexual behaviors are not the sole result of circulating testosterone levels. The sexual performance of castrated dogs is blunted compared with that of intact dogs; however, castration does not eliminate either sexual motivation or ability.¹ Regardless, most mounting behavior is not simply response to sexual arousal, even if it is accompanied by pelvic thrusting or penile erection.

Dominance

In recent years, veterinarians have watched a resurgence of the so-called dominance theory of dog behavior, which posits that everything dogs do is linked to striving for dominance. Owners may think that their dog is "dominant" because it mounts other dogs, visitors, or objects. Sometimes a dog mounts another dog to establish or remind the other dog of its status. But this is not necessarily a problem if the other dog defers and allows the mounting as normal social behavior.

It is important to review all situations surrounding the mounting behavior and the other interactions between the individuals to determine whether mounting is a dominance gesture, as it can occur in so many contexts. Dominance is a relationship between two individuals; in contrast, by definition, mounting inanimate objects (eg, pillows, blankets, stuffed animals) never reflects an individual's need to strive for dominance.

Dominance & Mounting: Which Comes First?

- It is important to distinguish whether mounting is an attempt to establish dominance or if the dogs already have a stable relationship.
- The mounting behavior is not based on or reflective of dominance if the dog also mounts inanimate objects.



Play

In a dog's world, play involves more than "fun" in that it represents an important social lubricant. Individuals that play together are able to cooperate and get along in other situations. Many behaviors displayed during play occur in other contexts as well. For example, much canine play involves the predatory sequence of staring, stalking, and chasing. Role reversals are a normal part of play, helping to establish trust between individuals. It is not unusual to see a dog that is normally subordinate mounting a dog that never defers. This behavior does not mean that the normally submissive dog is challenging the other for dominance; rather, it could be indicative of a healthy relationship between the two dogs.

Self-Soothing Behavior

Mounting may also occur as a self-soothing behavior. In this context, the dog may mount an object (toy, dog bed, blanket) before settling to sleep. This may not occur every time the dog rests, but this is behavior similar to thumb sucking.

CLOSING REMARKS

Mounting can be a sign of behavioral problems or of impaired welfare (ie, a certain situation may be too stressful or exciting). Behavior modification to diminish mounting in stressful and exciting situations may help curb the activity (ie, decreasing frequency and duration).

When mounting activities are repetitive, they can develop into compulsive behavior; the behavior has changed from a response based on stimuli (eg, arrival of visitors) to one performed throughout the day at the exclusion of other behaviors. In addition to a diminished quality of life, the dog can develop secondary physical problems to be addressed, such as rubbing-associated dermatitis or exacerbation of preexisting musculoskeletal problems.

See **Aids & Resources**, back page, for references & suggested reading.

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