

Believe it or not, one of the most frequently searched subjects by readers is *stool eating*. It would seem there are a lot of pets (primarily dogs) out there snacking on poop!

I think we can all agree this is a revolting subject, but it's a common problem that should be addressed.

Coprophagia is the technical term for stool eating. It is considered inappropriate, not to mention disgusting eating behavior. The single exception is with mother dogs and cats that deliberately ingest the feces of their litters to hide their scent while the babies are still vulnerable and hidden away in the den or nest.

Medical Reasons for Coprophagia

Dogs eat poop for lots of reasons. Sometimes there's an underlying medical problem like an enzyme deficiency or pancreatic insufficiency. Intestinal malabsorption and GI parasites are also common medical reasons underlying coprophagia.

It is recommended that healthy dogs be seen every six months for a stool check for parasites. Healthy dogs can wind up with intestinal parasites from eating poop, so twice-yearly stool analysis can be a very helpful tool.

A dog's pancreas secretes digestive enzymes to aid in food digestion, but many dogs don't make enough of these enzymes and wind up deficient. Since the feces of other animals are a good source of digestive enzymes, dogs with a deficiency will sometimes ingest enzyme-rich poop. 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.

Dogs on processed dry food diets will often seek out other sources of digestive enzymes to make up for a chronic enzyme deficiency brought on by a biologically inappropriate diet.

Cats with enzyme deficiencies, malabsorption issues, and/or who are fed poor-quality nutrition can provide litter box temptations for dogs. Many cheap dry pet foods contain ingredients that are impossible to digest, so they pass right through the cat's GI tract and out the other end undigested. This provides poop eating dogs an opportunity to sample cat "snacks" right out of the litter box.

Behavioral Causes

Some dogs, especially those in kennel situations, may eat poop because they are 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.

There is a lot of coprophagia in puppy mill dogs. 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 poop eating dogs can actually “lead by example,” encouraging younger dogs in the household to pick up the nasty habit.

Oddly, some dogs 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 still others only indulge their habit at certain times of the year.

Study Investigates Poop Eating Behavior

Last year a researcher at the University of California, Davis collected 1,500 internet surveys from pet owners to learn more about poop eating in dogs. The study found that:

- 16 percent of dogs eat stools frequently and 85 percent eat other dogs’ poop
- Intact males are less likely to indulge than neutered dogs of either sex
- Poop eaters are more likely to live with other dogs and are greedy eaters
- 40 percent of Border Collies and Shelties are stool eaters; no Poodles were reported to be
- 90 percent of stools were eaten within two days

The researchers concluded, based on this last finding, that since poop eaters prefer “fresh” stools, the habit may have developed from an innate drive to keep the den clean and protect pack members from intestinal parasites, which would not yet have incubated to an infectious stage.

The researchers also found that food additives are only effective as a deterrent from 0 to 2 percent of the time, nor is punishment effective. Also ineffective were electronic collars and reward-based reinforcement like clicker training. The UC Davis team concluded the best solution is to supervise and clean up after your dog. Or perhaps get a male Poodle!

Suggestions for Owners of Coprophagic Pets

- Feed a diet containing human-grade (preferably unprocessed) [protein](#) and supplement with probiotics and digestive enzymes to help curb your pet’s urge to find gross sources of free enzymes around the yard or in the litter box.
- Pick up your dog’s feces immediately, as soon after he eliminates as possible.

- If you have cats, get a self-cleaning litter box, place the box in a location in your home where your dog can't get to it, or consider purchasing or making a dog-resistant litter box. I also recommend you improve your kitty's diet and add digestive enzymes and probiotics at meal time to make your cat's poop less appealing to your dog.
- Make sure your dog has toys that stimulate his brain and alleviate boredom. Also insure he is well exercised. Bored, sedentary dogs tend to develop far stranger behaviors and habits than dogs who get plenty of exercise and mental stimulation.
- 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 MSG.

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