

# WHY DOES MY DOG EAT FECES?

Some dogs can't resist a tasty morsel of feces. These dogs will eat their own excrement or that of another dog. Some prefer horse feces, others cat. Frozen feces seem particularly popular in the winter. So why do dogs do this? In the past, it was believed that feces-eating, also known as coprophagia, was caused by either poor diet or poor health. However, this theory is not supported by current research. "Behavioral research has discounted the idea that it is a dietary deficiency or a pancreatic enzyme deficiency," says Dr. Jo Ann Eurell, a veterinarian and animal behavior specialist at the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine. "Dogs are historically scavengers, and this is believed to be scavenger behavior.

"It is important for dog owners to know that this behavior is normal for a mother dog with pups," adds Dr. Eurell. Newborn pups must learn to urinate and defecate. The mother teaches the pups by licking their bottoms. The pups respond to this "tickle" by urinating and defecating. The mother then consumes the pups' excrement, which serves two protective purposes: It keeps the den area clean, and it removes smells that could attract predators. Some pups learn this behavior from their mothers and will stimulate themselves and consume their own feces. Most pups stop by the time they are weaned.

It is more difficult to understand why adult dogs eat feces. Some dogs will learn this behavior from other dogs. In some cases, eating feces may be an attention-seeking behavior. For some dogs, it is possibly due to anxiety or boredom. Most often the motivation for eating feces is just not known.

Owners find this habit disgusting--particularly when the consumed feces are thrown up all over the carpet. In addition to being socially unacceptable, eating feces exposes the dog to parasites and diseases. So what can you do?

"Eating feces is a problem that is easier to prevent than to cure," says Dr. Eurell. "Don't allow the opportunity to arise. Keep the dog's yard clean by disposing of feces immediately. Move the cat box out of the dog's reach. If cleaning the outdoor area is not feasible, then keep the dog on a leash or use a muzzle when outside."

There are some "cures" that have been used with limited success. Punishment generally only works in the early stages, before the behavior becomes habitual. Feeding the dog MSG, garlic, or pumpkin is believed to give feces a bad taste, making it less attractive to the dog. Other products can be applied to the feces directly; however, dogs are very perceptive and can probably distinguish between tainted and untainted feces. Besides, if you're going to walk around the dog sprinkling pepper on feces, why not just pick them up?

The best solution is to supervise your dog and not let it develop the habit in the first place and keep the yard picked up.

--by Theresa A. Fuess, Ph.D.