

The Real Reason Dogs Eat Poop – and How to Make Them Stop

They don't do it because they think it's yummy or to gross you out. But there are a number of reasons why they might do it. Address the root cause, of course. But what you really want to know is how to stop this bizarre behavior. And there's really only one answer for that.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs don't engage in coprophagia (poop-eating) because they like the taste or to gross out their owners
- Many dogs 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
- Sometimes coprophagia is behavioral in nature, especially among puppy mill 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, and supervise him in situations where he could encounter the feces of other pets or wildlife

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If and when your BFF (best furry friend) 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). This is because, according to Jacob Brogan, writing for Smithsonian.com:

"... [M]ore 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."¹

The scientific name for "this behavior" is coprophagia, and it will typically be your dog and not your cat who indulges.

Beyond the disgust factor, many dog parents who catch little Buddy or Bella in the act leap to the conclusion there's something wrong with their pet. But as Brogan points out, that's not always or even typically the case.

"In fact," he writes, "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."

Many Dogs Eat Poop to Correct Digestive Deficiencies

Many 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.

Brogan actually interviewed me for his Smithsonian article, and as I explained to him, 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 kibble, 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.

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.

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.

Other Species Also Eat Feces

If your canine companion partakes of the occasional poop snack, it might make you feel better to know he's got plenty of company. Many species eat feces, including mice and the capybara, the largest rodent in the world.

And as I explained to Brogan, guinea pigs also indulge, and are good examples of domesticated animals that may eat poop to stay healthy, not because they're sick.

If you happen to have a guinea pig and haven't noticed the behavior, it's probably because the little guys are very quick. Rumor has it they can "recycle" their own poop up to 50 times in an hour!

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 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 dogs can actually role model poop-eating behavior for younger dogs in the household.

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 Tips 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 or in the litterbox. I've also had success using Homeostatic Soil Organisms.
2. Pick up your dog's feces immediately, as soon after she eliminates as possible.
3. If your dog favors litterbox snacks, place the box in a location in your home where she 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 attractive to your dog.

4. Make sure she has toys that stimulate her brain and alleviate boredom. Also insure she's well-exercised. Bored, sedentary dogs tend to develop far stranger behaviors and habits than dogs who get plenty of exercise and mental stimulation.
5. Consider experimenting with some of the over-the-counter coprophagia deterrent products. Make sure you look for a nontoxic 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, I recommend 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.

5 Fast Facts About Poop-Eating Behavior

Researchers at the University of California (UC), Davis conducted an Internet survey of 1,500 pet owners to learn more about coprophagia in dogs.² 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. 40% of Border Collies and Shelties are stool eaters; no Poodles were reported to be
5. 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 UC Davis team concluded the best solution is to supervise and clean up after your dog.

Sources and References

[Smithsonian.com November 4, 2016](#)

¹ [Smithsonian.com, November 4, 2016](#)

² [Western Veterinary Conference 2013, Canine Coprophagia, Dr. Ben Hart, DVM, PhD, DACVB](#)
