

## A Tell-Tale Sign of Gut Disease That Few People Recognize

Many owners just brush it off as affection towards you or an obsessive behavior, but that could be a big mistake. What to do - and what to request of your vet - if you notice this odd behavior in your pet. Plus: My unique approach for lasting relief and treatment.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Finally a Canadian study concludes that most dogs with "excessive licking of surfaces" (ELS) behavior have a GI disorder
- After treatment for their GI disorders, almost 60 percent of dogs in the study showed significant improvement in ELS behaviors, and over half had complete resolution
- The treatment the dogs received involved drugs and commercial elimination diets, so it's unlikely the improvement in their conditions was sustained
- Any dog with ELS should be evaluated for digestive disorders. Treatment of GI disease in most cases should begin with appropriate dietary changes and beneficial supplements and alternative therapies

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Often, the first sign your pet isn't feeling well is a change in behavior. Many pet guardians are aware that certain behavior changes, such as a sudden lack of interest in playing or eating, are red flags. But there are actually many other types of behaviors pets perform that can also signal an underlying health problem, including obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

For example, if your canine companion is obsessed with licking things, he might have a condition called "excessive licking of surfaces," or ELS.

ELS describes a dog's relentless, repetitive licking of floors, carpets, walls, furniture, his owner's legs, hands, or arms, and even his own lips. It does not refer to self-licking, which is usually caused by itchy, irritated, or inflamed skin, hot spots, and/or acral lick dermatitis.

Excessive licking behavior may seem harmless, which is why many dog guardians just try to ignore it. However, if your dog swallows enough hair or fibers from the objects he's licking, it could potentially result in a very serious intestinal blockage requiring surgery.

Some concerned dog guardians ask their veterinarian about the behavior, and are often told it is an obsessive-compulsive disorder. However, holistic vets have known for years that animals who "air lick" or obsessively lick floors, sofas, carpets, etc., almost always have GI issues.

Fortunately, a recent Canadian study suggests that ELS may actually be health-related rather than a behavioral issue. Hopefully, the study findings will motivate more conventional veterinarians to evaluate dogs with ELS behavior for potential GI disorders.

## **74 Percent of Dogs With ELS have a Gastrointestinal Disease**

The study<sup>1</sup> was conducted by researchers at the University of Montréal Veterinary Teaching Hospital and involved 19 dogs with ELS, 16 of which engaged in the behavior on a daily basis. Ten healthy dogs were also involved as controls.

The dogs received behavioral, physical, and neurological examinations, followed by a thorough digestive system evaluation that included laboratory tests, ultrasound, endoscopy, and histopathologic analysis of GI tissue samples.

The results showed that 14 of the 19 dogs (74 percent) with ELS had GI disease. Identified disorders included:

- Eosinophilic and/or lymphoplasmacytic infiltration of the GI tract
- Delayed gastric emptying
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Chronic pancreatitis
- Gastric foreign body
- Giardiasis

Treatment based on diagnostic findings was initiated, and the dogs were monitored for 90 days.

The researchers observed significant improvement in ELS behavior in 10 of 17 dogs (59 percent), with complete resolution in 9 of 17 (53 percent). They also observed that the ELS dogs were not significantly more anxious than the control dogs.

A few of the dogs (7) in the study engaged in ELS behavior after meals when they were at home, which the researchers suggested might indicate nausea or discomfort triggered by eating.

The researchers concluded that GI disorders should be considered in dogs who display excessive licking of surfaces behavior.

## **Study Treatments Involved Commercial Diets and Drugs**

While the study findings are certainly important, unfortunately, the treatments administered to the ELS dogs were limited to drugs and special commercial processed diets.

The treatments were based on the dogs' diagnostic test results and symptoms, and included:

- Fenbendazole, a broad-spectrum anti-parasitic drug used to treat giardia infections
- Commercial (processed) elimination diets
- Prednisone (a corticosteroid), sometimes coupled with cyclosporine (an immunosuppressant) for dogs with eosinophilic and/or lymphoplasmacytic infiltration of the GI tract (e.g., lymphoma)

- Prokinetic drugs to enhance GI motility, coupled with canned food for dogs with delayed gastric emptying
- Sulfasalazine, an anti-inflammatory drug, coupled with soluble fiber for dogs with irritable bowel syndrome
- Manual removal of a gastric foreign body (a 12-inch nylon rope) in one dog
- Five ELS dogs with no diagnosed GI abnormalities received elimination diets, antacids, and in some cases, anti-nausea drugs.

## **How I Approach Excessive Surface Licking/GI Issues in Dogs**

This was a short 90-day study to determine if dogs with ELS have an underlying GI issue, and whether treatment of GI issues has a positive effect on obsessive licking behavior.

The answer to both those questions is obviously yes, however, I'm concerned about the use of drugs when there are safer alternatives, and I'm certainly no fan of processed diets. My guess is most of the dogs in the study achieved only temporary relief from their GI disorders and ELS.

When I treat a dog with GI disease, I always try to resolve the problem without resorting to the use of drugs. An exception might be in the case of an established, identified infection (e.g., giardiasis) requiring anti-parasitics or antibiotics, because the infection was not responsive to natural alternatives.

In my experience, overuse of antibiotics and corticosteroids like prednisone in veterinary medicine is the root cause of many of the GI issues we see in pets today. Their use should be strictly limited to situations in which no safer option is available or has proved effective.

Unfortunately, many conventional vets continue to automatically prescribe these medications to treat disorders of the digestive tract, and even worse, they often leave patients on these drugs for weeks, months, or years, making long-term side effects almost inevitable.

## **Dietary, Supplement and Alternative Therapy Recommendations**

I always steer clear of processed pet food, including "commercial elimination diets," opting instead for a customized anti-inflammatory diet of fresh, whole, organic, and non-GMO foods. Each diet must be tailored to the individual animal's specific GI disorder(s) and symptoms.

Working with a nutritionist allows you to create the perfect diet for your pet. To date, there is not a single "veterinary diet" that is made with human grade ingredients. They all contain poor quality, rendered "feed grade" left overs as well as synthetic nutrients to make up for the depletion that occurs during the substantial manufacturing process.

Many people don't realize healing modalities such as acupuncture and chiropractic can also be very helpful in treating GI disorders. For example, holistic veterinarians are aware that many dogs with excessive licking behavior have hiatal hernias that can be managed with chiropractic care.

A veterinary chiropractor I know gets dozens of referrals to treat ELS dogs diagnosed with hiatal hernias!

## If Your Dog Is Obsessively Licking Things ...

If you're concerned your dog may have ELS and/or a GI condition, I recommend making an appointment with your integrative/holistic veterinarian for a checkup, including all appropriate diagnostic tests and a thorough GI evaluation.

Once you've ruled a GI disorder in or out, together you can decide the best approach to treat your dog's specific situation.

### Sources and References

[Clinician's Brief January 2013](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Journal of Veterinary Behavior, July-August 2012 Volume 7, Issue 4, Pages 194-204](#)

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