

Dogs Often Do This Just Before Snapping or Biting

Can you spot the tipoffs? Body language tells some of the story, but not all. While it's natural in the wild, it's simple to prevent in your home. And it could save a scary scenario and trip to the ER, for your people or pets. Take this pre-emptive action today.

Reviewed by **Dr. Becker**

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Resource guarding can be a normal behavior for dogs; however, it can become threatening or aggressive, which is a problem
- There are many resources dogs choose to guard, and one of the most common is the food bowl
- The first step in managing the behavior is to eliminate all factors that trigger the resource guarding; in multi-dog households, it's important that dogs have their own bowls and are kept separated at mealtime
- Reward-based training is the most effective way to curb food bowl aggression, and ideally prevent it in the first place
- Even dogs who don't normally resource guard may do so when given a recreation bone or chew, so it's important to offer these types of treats safely

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published December 10, 2018.

Resource guarding is a natural behavior for dogs, because in the wild, a canine's ability to protect his possessions (e.g., his food, den, mate, etc.) is essential to his survival. But when the dogs who live in our homes decide to resource-guard, sometimes it's a problem.

Resource guarding can be relatively harmless, for example, some dogs immediately run off to their crate or bed with a favorite snack or a new toy. The behavior can also be threatening, such as when a dog growls at other family members who approach her favorite human. At the other end of the spectrum is resource guarding that takes the form of full-blown aggression, such as biting, fighting or chasing the person or animal away.

Some dogs only resource guard around certain people, typically strangers, while others consider all people a threat to their possessions. They also differ in what types of things they guard. Some guard recreational chew bones, others guard toys or stolen treasures and still others guard their favorite human.

One of the most common things dogs guard is their food bowl. Expert dog trainer Susan Garrett suggests owners be observant for signs their dog isn't comfortable with the close proximity of humans to their food, including one or more of these escalating signs:

- Gulps his food very fast
- Stops eating and raises his head slightly out of the food bowl

- Stops eating and tenses up his body
- Stares at you or away from you
- Gives a low growl
- Air snaps

Tips for Managing a Food-Aggressive Dog

- **Don't give your dog a reason to resource guard** — Feed him behind a physical barrier like a pet gate, or behind a closed door, and make it a house rule — especially if there are kids in the home — that everyone maintains their distance and leaves the dog alone at mealtime.

It's also not a good idea to try to train a puppy not to resource guard by messing with him while he's eating (e.g., putting his bowl down and picking it back up over and over, petting him, etc.), says veterinary behaviorist Dr. Julie Albright.¹ She advises against this because it could actually backfire and condition the pup to be wary of people around his bowl. See Susan Garrett's suggestions, below, to prevent food aggression from occurring in puppies.

Repeating an action over and over as a desensitization technique doesn't always result in a tolerant dog and could actually have the opposite effect. Even a gentle, easygoing dog who endures being annoyed while he eats doesn't like it, so why do it? Would you want someone pulling your plate away randomly, or patting you on the head while you're enjoying a meal?

Free-feeding any pet also isn't advisable, but this goes double for dogs who are known to resource guard their food bowls, because if the bowl is always accessible and there's always food in it, the dog may feel he needs to continually guard it.

- **Don't bowl-share in multi-dog households** — There are many reasons feeding more than one dog from the same bowl is a bad idea, the most important of which is that it can trigger food aggression that results in injuries to a dog and/or an owner who tries to break up a **dogfight**. Veterinary behaviorist Dr. Sally Foote describes a common scenario at a food bowl shared by two dogs:

"What typically happens around a communal bowl is that dog No. 1 goes in to eat and keeps body blocking dog No. 2 away from the bowl. When dog No. 2 puts its head in the bowl, dog No. 1 will stare, growl and snarl. No bite has happened yet. When dog No. 1 has its head down, you miss seeing the signs of aggression.

*If dog No. 2 stands its ground, dog No. 1 will escalate. If dog No. 2 leaves, it will still go back to the bowl, often with another confrontation. Tensions escalate to the point of a fight. Often, these fights are severe because it is over an item for survival — food."*¹

There are few things more upsetting for a dog parent than a fight that ends with bite wounds serious enough to require emergency veterinary and/or human medical care. Another reason bowl sharing isn't recommended is that if two or more dogs are fed from the same bowl, unless the pet parent is standing over them at every meal, he or she can't know how much each dog is eating.

It's important to monitor your dog's appetite as a sign of her general well-being. In fact, one of the first questions most veterinarians ask when you bring your pet in for an exam is, "How's she eating?" or "Have you noticed any change in her appetite?"

Another reason to feed pets from their own bowls is to prevent a more dominant dog from eating his meal and then pushing others out of the way so he can help himself to their meals as well. Many animals over-consume calories if fed in the presence of other animals — it's almost a form of competitive eating.

This can quickly lead to obesity in a bossy dog and lack of adequate nourishment in the more **submissive dog**. Shared food bowls also don't allow for individualized meals based on each dog's dietary needs.

Dog housemates and even visiting dogs should be fed from individual bowls in separate areas of the house. If you can't physically close them off from each other, constant supervision is your only option. It's also a very good idea to pick up the bowls as soon as the dogs have eaten, because even empty bowls can trigger a problem.

- **Use reward-based training to curb food-aggressive behavior** — Reward-based training is an effective and compassionate way to change unwanted behaviors in dogs, including food bowl aggression. To use it effectively, it's important to recognize that an underlying emotion is driving your dog's behavior. To a food-aggressive dog, anyone on two legs or four who approaches his bowl means he's about to lose a valuable resource.

Albright recommends tossing a treat your dog really loves into the bowl as you approach. Try to do it from a safe distance and before he shows signs of resource guarding. The goal is to create a positive association between you near his food bowl and a yummy treat, which may extinguish his aggressive behavior over time.

You can also try taking this technique to the next level by asking your dog to sit for the treat when you approach the bowl. Albright also recommends involving any children in the home in the training (under close supervision), so the dog associates both big and small people near his bowl with tasty treats.

- **Offer recreational chews and bones safely** — A big, meaty chew bone can bring out the guard dog in even the most passive pooch, so this is an area where special attention and precautions are necessary.

Of course, the first order of business when selecting recreational chews or bones, the quality of which varies wildly, is to scrutinize labels and feel comfortable with the quality and size of the product you offer your dog. For a detailed discussion of how to pick the best bones and chews, see my video series "Bones and Your Dog, Part 1" and "Bones and Your Dog, Part 2."

It's also very important to moderate the time and frequency of chew-fests based on your pet's personality, health and the interrelationships among the dogs in multi-dog households. Monitoring dog-to-dog and dog-to-human interactions when offering bones and chews is very important.

If your dog resource guards his food bowl, don't underestimate how protective she can become when another dog — or human — tries to take a favorite bone or chew.

If you're not sure how your dogs will react to the introduction of bones or chews, it's always best to physically separate them for chew-fests, either in individual crates, in different rooms of the house or by putting one dog

outside with his bone or chew while the other enjoys his inside. Remember to collect all the chews when you're finished supervising a chew session, and always supervise every chew session.

Stopping Food Bowl Guarding Before It Starts

World-renowned dog trainer and canine relationship expert **Susan Garrett** offers these tips to prevent a bowl-guarder in the first place:

- **Create a positive association between you and the food the dog is about to get** — Hand feed 1/2 of the puppy's daily food rations, ideally in the form of training treats throughout the day. Take your puppy's remaining rations and divide each meal into three feeding bowls. Prior to feeding your pup, ask for a simple behavior (e.g., sit, down or nose bump) just before putting the food bowl down.

Practice this response prior to adding the big distraction of a full bowl of food. Once the puppy has finished one bowl pick it up and ask for another behavior then feed the next small portion and do the same for the last portion. By dividing the meal into three smaller meals you get to rehearse good food principles three times each meal, which means the puppy will learn three times faster!

- **Create a "people are good" trigger when you bring home a rescue dog** — Week one: while the dog is eating, walk by and drop some super-good treats into the bowl, like a bit of cheese or roast beef. If the dog shows any of the six signs of discomfort listed above, you can start by tossing the food toward the dog while eating.

Once the dog is not showing any stiffening or other signs of discomfort when you approach, you'll know you've he's making a positive association between you and his food. Pause and drop each treat into the bowl one at a time while you stand there.

Progress to this step when the dog is happy to see you approach while he's eating. Now you can pick up the bowl, add the amazing treats to it and put it back down. Once you've achieved this level, ask other family members to join you by walking by and adding good treats to the bowl.

Sources and References

¹ [dvm360, June 14, 2018](#)

² [News Gazette, June 10, 2010](#)