



DOG TRAINING SOLUTIONS

Coprophagia (poop eating)

Coprophagia (sometimes called coprophagia, or poop-eating) is a pretty disgusting habit that fortunately only some dogs indulge in. It seems to be "one of those things" as far as dogs go: a behaviour that defies logic and scientific study, and mystifies dog trainers and veterinarians around the world.

Many, if not most, dogs will eat the faeces of other animals (particularly other dogs, cats, sheep, and horses) with gusto whenever the opportunity presents itself. It's a very common behaviour in dogs, but not particularly well understood.

The simple truth is that nobody really knows why some dogs will make a beeline for a pile of poop that's lying on the grass. It's natural for dogs to want to sniff the poop - almost all dogs will do this, since the depositor's anal glands have left a kind of Post-It note there for other dogs to "read" - and it's just as natural (seemingly) for some dogs to want to consume these little signposts. It's just that we don't really know why they do it. Actually eating the faeces seems to be a matter of personal preference, from dog to dog: some dogs derive great satisfaction from consuming poop, whereas other dogs appear to be simply more fastidious by nature.

THERE ARE SEVERAL POPULAR THEORIES ABOUT THE CAUSES OF THIS STRANGE HABIT:

A dog that eats poop is doing so in order to supplement his own, nutritionally deficient diet. He is not getting enough vitamins from the food he's given in his own home, so he chooses to eat the poop of other animals (usually dogs and cats) in the hope that there may be some residual nutrition available for him to sponge up the second time around. This is a faintly plausible theory, apart from the fact that studies have been conducted on dogs suffering from malnutrition and well-nourished dogs with a clean bill of health: and the incidence of coprophagia among both groups was virtually identical.

- The behaviour may be derived from the carnivorous/scavenging heritage of our dogs. When carnivores make a kill, they typically consume the entire carcass of the animal – everything from the actual flesh to sinews and tendons to “offal”, which includes the stomach, digestive tract, and its contents (poop). It's been suggested by some that coprophagia is a simple and natural extension of this instinctive behaviour.

- It may be related to boredom or stress. The particulars of this theory are hazy, but essentially, bored or stressed dogs – such as those that spend too much time on their own, those that lead under stimulated, under exercised lives, and those that are excluded from family life and adequate human attention and affection – often succumb to strange and compulsive habits, like pulling out their own fur, spinning in circles for hours on end, and (theoretically, at least) poop eating. In other words, a dog will eat poop simply because there's nothing else for him to do.

- Internal parasites, such as worms, may be leaching nutrients and calories from the dog's stomach and digestive tract. Typically, a dog with worms will have a voracious appetite (even more so than usual!) and will consume all the food that he has access to. In more advanced cases, an infested dog will turn to technically-edible substances (such as poop), which he would not normally consider appetizing, to fill the gap.

- Improperly housetrained dogs sometimes eat their own poop in an attempt to conceal the “crime” from their owners and thus avoid detection. This is especially true of dogs whose owners tend to punish them for housetraining mistakes, whether out of

impatience/frustration or because they believe that the dog is somehow doing it to “spite” them. A dog that’s pooping inappropriately indoors either has not been housetrained correctly, in which case the accidents are not his fault; or the reason is medical in nature. To rule the latter out, the dog should be taken for a check-up at the vet (particularly if the indoor defecation has started suddenly and without warning).

- Nursing female dogs eat the poop of their puppies as a means of keeping the den area clean, and of hiding the existence of her pups from potential predators. It’s thought by some that one of the reasons that coprophagia is so commonplace in puppies, especially, is because they’re emulating the behaviour of their mother. Clearly, theories abound on the subject. Unfortunately, most of them lack merit: the simple truth is that, although we can guess as much as we like as to the reasons that our dogs willingly and enthusiastically ingest poop pretty much whenever the opportunity presents itself, nobody knows with any degree of certainty as to why they do it. Although it’s nearly impossible to “cure” a dog with a taste for poop of this socially unacceptable habit, here is a short list of tips for coping with the behaviour and minimizing it as much as possible:

- Clean up the poop in your own backyard as soon as the dog toilets. If he doesn’t have access to it, he can’t eat it – and it’ll save you from dealing with the flies, the odour, and the eventuality of someone treading in it.

- Teach your dog the “leave it” command for those times when you want to be able to walk him off lead. Reliable obedience in the “leave it” makes off lead walks a real pleasure (and it’s a lot safer for your dog, too – the usefulness of “leave it” applies to things like herbicide, snail bait, and broken glass as well as poop!).

- You can try booby-trapping the poop in the backyard with things like Tabasco sauce and lemon juice, but this seems like a great deal of (rather disgusting) trouble to go to when you could just pick the poop up. In addition to the natural deterrent of having to repeatedly handle specimens of dog turds, reports of success from this technique are pretty erratic – in most cases, it seems that a dog bent on coprophagia isn’t going to be put off by a brief burning sensation in his mouth.

- There are substances you can buy from pet stores and vet clinics which, when put into the dog’s food (or the food of the household pet whose poop he’s eating) makes the poop smell and taste very unappealing to dogs. One such product is called “For-Bid”.

- You can experiment with adding natural deterrents – such as a few tablespoonfuls of canned pumpkin or pineapple, or fresh grated zucchini – to your dog’s meals. Again, anecdotal evidence suggests that most dogs will readily eat these substances, but that their presence in poop makes it unpalatable.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information on bewildering canine behaviours – what they are, how to recognize them, why they happen, and what to do about them – check out SitStayFetch. Written by an experienced dog-trainer, it’s packed with useful and valuable information on training your dog and coping with problematic behaviours. No responsible dog-owner should be without a copy!

You can check out SitStayFetch by clicking on the following link:

<http://www.kingdomofpets.com/dogobediencetraining/?aff=cbdtsol608&type=nohop>