

Nasty Things Your Dog Eats & Why

One of the most perplexing behavior problems facing dog owners is sometimes difficult to confess: why does their dog have such a penchant for eating feces? It may be of little comfort to know that the ingestion of feces, or coprophagia (cop-ro-FAGE-ee-ah), is a universally normal behavior among dogs. It is so common that almost all dog owners will experience this dreaded sight: their pet will seek, dig up and consume the stool of wild animals such as deer and rabbits, feast on horse manure, and even raid the cat's litter box on occasion. As with most behavior problems (and it can become a troublesome habit in some cases), it helps to first understand the reasons, and then to assess whether the behavior requires intervention.



Coprophagia is a normal drive for dogs because of two possible reasons. First, dogs, from their wild background, are "programmed" to clean up the stool of very young pups -- whether their own or the offspring of a pack-mate (in fact, most members of wolf packs are related). By doing so, it is presumed that they assist in keeping the den clean of parasites. A second reason for ingestion of stool particularly that of some wild animal is that feces can contain important nutrients. Rabbits and some hoofed animals, for example, harbor nutrient-producing organisms in their intestines, which then produce feces with important nutrients such as B vitamins. Given the knowledge that a dog's brain, on some level, is programmed for coprophagia, it is easier to understand why our pet dogs may sometimes exhibit this abhorrent (to us, anyway) behavior.

Can coprophagia, essentially a normal behavior, become a problem? The answer lies both with the sensibilities of the owner, and with the degree (and characteristics) of the behavior. If your dog only rarely does this, perhaps on an occasional hike in the woods, it can probably be ignored. If, however, the behavior becomes extreme and interferes with the day-to-day life of you or your dog, it should be addressed. Dogs eat the feces of other dogs on occasion -- but this behavior should be relatively rare in the adult (on the other hand, it is a relatively common behavior in young puppies, and will usually fade with maturity). Dogs that actively seek and ingest the feces of other dogs may be showing a stress-related problem such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, which should be addressed with the help of a veterinarian or veterinary behaviorist. Those who routinely ingest their own feces in the back yard may simply be occupying empty time; for these dogs, active supervision, leash walks and yard clean-ups can help dramatically. When litter-box raiding becomes a problem, and it is a very common one, owners may have to devise ways to restrict the dog's access to the box (without hindering the box's accessibility to cats). A simple hook-and-eye lock, holding the litter room's door ajar just wide enough for a cat, can solve the problem.

Coprophagia can be difficult to think about -- but it helps to know that, in many cases, it is a normal behavior. However, just because we understand its basis does not mean it is acceptable. If it becomes a problem at any level, ask your veterinarian for help in changing it.