Stool Eating (Coprophagy)

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Q. What are the causes and cures of stool eating?

A. Coprophagy (pronounced kä - präf' - je) comes from the Greek *copro* which means feces and *phagy* which means eat. And that is what it is – eating feces. A habit of dogs we all find disgusting, but as we say, dogs will be dogs. Some dogs especially like feces from herbivores like rabbits, deer, and horses. Others love to raid the cat's litter box. Still others only eat dog feces if it is frozen.

Why do dogs eat feces?

A lot of theories have been suggested as to why dogs eat feces. Are they missing something in their diet? Generally not.

Dogs who eat their feces usually do not have a dietary deficiency. Some medical problems, however, can contribute to coprophagy including severe disorders of the pancreas (pancreatic insufficiency) or intestine, severe malnutrition from massive parasitic infestations, or starvation. These cases are rare, however having your dog examined by a veterinarian to rule out potential medical problems is a good idea.

Some dogs, especially those in kennel situations, may eat feces because they are anxious or stressed. One researcher suggests that dogs who have been punished by their owners for defecating inappropriately start to think any defecation is wrong, so they try to eliminate the evidence.

Another theory is that coprophagy is a trait passed down through the ages. Dogs' cousins, the wolves and coyotes, may often eat feces if food is in short supply. Feces from herbivores (animals that eat plants for food) contain many of the B vitamins. Some researchers suggest that wolves (and some dogs) may eat feces to replenish their vitamin supply.

In some instances, coprophagy may be a behavior learned from watching other animals. It may also become a habit in the course of play and puppies having to try out the taste of everything.

There is a stage of life in which coprophagy is common and expected. Can you think of what it is? Bitches and queens normally eat the feces of their offspring. This is presumed to occur in an attempt to hide the presence of the litter from predators.

Finally, some dogs may eat feces just because it tastes good (to them).

How do we prevent coprophagia from occurring?

The best way to prevent the problem is to keep yards and kennels free of feces.

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Clean up any feces as soon as the dog defecates.

Some owners find it successful to use something to make the feces taste horrible. Products such as For-bid (for cats or dogs) and Drs. Foster and Smith Dis-Taste (for dogs) are added to the food of the animal whose feces are being eaten (it could be the food of the dog with coprophagy if he eats his own stool; or the food of the cat, if the dog with coprophagy eats the cat's feces). The product is digested by the animal, and results in giving the feces a very bad taste. Some people try putting Tabasco sauce or cayenne pepper (chili powder) on the feces (not the food!). Unfortunately, some dogs have acquired quite a taste for Tabasco. These methods work best if the behavior has just started. Once coprophagy has become a habit, it is very difficult to break.

Dogs should be on a leash when walking, so you have control over the dog in case a luscious pile of feces is found along the way. Sometimes, the only way to prevent coprophagy is to fit the dog with a wire basket muzzle. The dog will be able to sniff, pant, and do most things dogs do, but the dog will not be able to eat with the muzzle on. DO NOT LEAVE A MUZZLED DOG UNATTENDED.

Adding toys and other diversions to the environment may be helpful. We need to find something that is more fun for the dog than eating feces. A dog may find a Kong toy laced with peanut butter a better alternative. Also give the dog lots of exercise to help him ultimately relax.

In situations in which the behavior may be linked to stress, the cause of stress should be eliminated or at least reduced. In some instances of extreme anxiety, or if the behavior becomes obsessive-compulsive, medication may be necessary to try to break the cycle.

Changing the diet to one using hydrolyzed protein may be beneficial. Your veterinarian will be able to recommend one for you.

Some dogs will improve if they are fed more often, so you may want to increase the number of meals (but keep the total daily intake about the same). Feeding the dry kibble out of a food dispensing toy may also be helpful.

There have been anecdotal reports that adding Prozyme to the diet may aid in eliminating this problem.

Some owners have found that using a citronella correction collar may be helpful. If the dog starts to approach any feces, the owner stimulates the collar to spray. Timing is critical, and this will only be helpful if you can constantly monitor the dog while he is outside and in an area where there may be feces. Clicker training, to train the dog to move away from feces and get a reward has also helped in some situations.

For dogs attracted to litter boxes, you may need to be quite creative. Using covered litter boxes and placing the opening towards a wall may help. Some

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people put the litter box up high. Others put the litter box in a closet and secure the closet door so that the opening is big enough for the cat but will not allow the dog to enter. Keep in mind that if we make the litter box too difficult to reach, the cat may not go to it either.

Above all, do not punish the dog for eating feces. This may reinforce the behavior. General work on obedience is sometimes helpful. If the dog knows what is expected of him and looks to you for cues, he may be less anxious and less likely to start or continue the behavior.

What are the health risks of coprophagy?

Many parasites can be transmitted through eating stool. Generally, herbivores have parasites specific to them; these parasites will not cause disease in carnivores. But dogs eating the feces of other dogs or cats can infect themselves repeatedly with parasites such as giardia, coccidia, and if the feces are around for 2-3 weeks or more, roundworms and whipworms. Such dogs should have regular fecal examinations and dewormings with the appropriate medications depending on the parasites found.

Summary

We are not sure why dogs eat their own feces or the feces of other animals. We do know that if a dog starts this behavior, the sooner we implement prevention measures, the better the chance of success.

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