

COPROPHAGY

Coprophagy is the eating of feces. Some dogs eat their own feces, others eat the feces of other dogs, some eat cat feces, and still others eat only feces from herbivores like deer, rabbits, or horses. It is a habit of some dogs that we all find disgusting. Dogs that eat their feces usually do not have a dietary deficiency. Some medical problems can contribute to coprophagy including severe disorders of the pancreas, severe malnutrition, massive parasitic infestations, or starvation. These cases are rare. Some dogs, especially those in kennel situations, may eat feces because they are anxious or stressed. In some instances, coprophagy may be a behavior learned from watching other animals. It may become a habit with puppies having to try out the taste of everything. Puppies are particularly prone to developing this habit and many naturally outgrow the problem. Bitches and queens normally eat the feces of their offspring in an attempt to hide the presence of the litter from predators. Some dogs may eat feces just because it tastes good to them.

The best way to prevent the problem is to keep yards and kennels free of feces. You can also use something to make the feces taste horrible, like Forbid, which is added to the food of the animals whose feces are being eaten. The powder is digested by the animal and results in giving the feces a very bad taste. Tabasco sauce, cayenne pepper, or bitter apple sprinkled on the feces can also deter dogs. Sometimes the only way to prevent coprophagy is to fit the dog with a wire muzzle. The dog will be able to sniff and pant, but the dog will not be able to eat with the muzzle on. Do not leave a muzzled dog unattended. Adding toys or other diversions to the environment may help. If the behavior is linked to stress, the cause of the stress should be eliminated or at least reduced. Increasing exercise may help. Do not punish the dog for eating feces. This is usually not effective because it can be interpreted as attention or the dog may learn not to show the behavior when the owner is present.

When re-training a dog that eats feces, it is important to eliminate the dog's opportunity to partake in the inappropriate behavior. You can reduce the opportunity for the dog to eat feces by promptly collecting and disposing of feces that are located in the yard and other areas where this behavior occurs. Interrupting inappropriate behavior with negative stimuli makes the behavior less likely to occur over time. Examples of negative stimuli include a shot from a water spray bottle, or use a noisemaker, like shaking an empty pop can filled with coins.

Many parasites can be transmitted through eating stool, like giardia, coccidia, roundworms, hookworms, and tapeworms. Dogs that eat feces should have regular fecal exams and dewormings with the appropriate medications depending on the parasites found. We recommend fecal exams on all our patients every 6 months. If your dog suffers from coprophagy, please call us today for an examination, fecal test, and a supply of Forbid.

Please see our article on zoonosis for more information.