

# Coprophagy in Dogs

## Definition:

**Corprophagy** occurs when a dog consumes either its own feces or another animal's feces. It is a disgusting, but usually normal, habit that can lead to potential health hazards, as well as to a break in the bond with our pets.

## General Information:

Corprophagy is a common and usually normal behavior among dogs, whether it involves the consumption of its own, another dog's, and/or other species' feces (ex: "raiding" the cat litterbox). It tends to occur in younger dogs, and most of the pets "outgrow" this behavior, though some may continue into adulthood. Coprophagy can cause stress to owners both due to its distasteful nature and potential health concerns involving both the animal and human counterparts in the household. Although there are several theories as to why coprophagy occurs, the actual etiology of the behavior is unknown. Proposed reasons include:

- Pleasant taste (for the dog) / high protein diets
- Mother – puppy feces consumption
- Inappropriate rewarding by the owner
- Behavior in relation to stress
- Imbalanced diet
- Health problem

## Treatment/Prevention:

Since the exact cause of coprophagy is unknown, treatment can prove to be difficult and requires patience on the owner's part.

Causes of coprophagy can be divided into two main types: (1) medical (2) purely behavioral. For the former, a veterinarian should be consulted to better assess the situation. Possible signs that could point to a medical condition include blood in feces, change in stool composition, or any other abnormal signs, such as vomiting, decreased activity, etc.

For helping to eliminate purely behavioral causes of coprophagy, a three step method can be used:

### **1. *Decrease attractive quality of feces***

- **Change in diet** can oftentimes be beneficial, switching to a brand with a lower protein content to lower the amount of protein excreted into the feces (which the dog finds palatable).
- **Commercially available products added to food** can decrease the palatability of the feces. Examples include: For-bid®; Deter®; and meat tenderizers. Consult with your veterinarian as to the proper dose to use.

## 2. **Prevent expression of behavior**

- **Being present** and **scooping up the feces immediately** is a good way to prevent this behavior.
- **Keeping the dog on leash** when taking him/her out to eliminate can help the owner physically prevent the dog from engaging in coprophagy.
- **Controlled feeding time** allows the owner to predict time of defecation and be more vigilant when watching the dog.
- **Preventing access** to other pet's litterboxes or cleaning them frequently.
- **Spray collars**, such as citronella can be used to deter the dog as well.
- **“Booby-trapping” feces**, by adding hot sauce or “bitter apple” flavor INTO the feces, so the dog associates bad tastes with its feces.
- **Not rewarding the behavior** by ignoring the dog when it consumes its feces, despite how difficult it may be for the owner.

## 3. **Reward post-elimination behavior**

- **Positive reinforcement immediately** after good behavior (so owner must be present). Keep the dog on leash, and if the dog does not go for its feces, reward it with food and praise. Also, if the dog does try to reach for its feces, divert its attention to another simple task (such as asking to “sit” or “shake paw”) and reward it for performing the task.

## **Health Concerns:**

As with all pets, regardless of whether or not the dog is coprophagic, owners should be careful about washing their hands at appropriate times, such as before eating, after handling feces, etc. Cleanliness is the first line of defense against potential disease transmission, which can include intestinal parasites.

Coprophagy can be very distasteful to owners and can be a public health concern. If this occurs, consider seeing your local veterinarian to rule out any possible diseases as the cause and to develop a plan to help eliminate the behavior.

*Handout created as part of a class exercise by veterinary students:  
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