

There is probably no other behaviour problem quite so distressing and repugnant to pet owners as the family dog that eats stool. However, coprophagia **is a normal activity**. Bitches eat their puppies' stool to keep the nest clean, and the behaviour has been seen in some wild canines. Although some viruses and intestinal protozoa can be transmitted in this way, dogs that eat stool seldom suffer any adverse health effects.

Dogs can generally be divided into two groups; those that eat their own stool, and those that eat the stool of other species like cats, cows, and horses. Dogs that partake in cow and horse stool are unlikely to be correctable, as the stool itself is so rewarding. Dogs should not be allowed to eat the stools of cows, horses, chickens, ducks, and other farm animals as this can be risky if the animals have been recently dewormed. The best way to prevent this form of coprophagia is to prevent access to the stool. Keep the kitty box out of reach of the family dog, and leave the dog at home when you visit the farm.

Although it is a common problem, **little is known about why some dogs eat their own stool**. There is, however, wide individual variation in the expressing of the behaviour. **Most dogs outgrow the habit**, some partake only in the winter (popsicles), and some indulge occasionally.

There is good clinical evidence of a **genetic susceptibility** to coprophagia **in certain breeds and families** of dogs. This predisposition is **generally expressed between 4-10 months of age**, and the activity **generally declines** after one year.

Dogs fed diets high in carbohydrate and low in fat and fibre (which contribute to a "full" feeling) are more likely to eat stool. As well, dogs that are not fed enough food to

meet their requirements may "fill up" on stool.

Coprophagia can be attention-getting behaviour, which is **conditioned by the owner's reaction**. It may also contain elements of play; especially in puppies, and the stool itself appears to be rewarding.

Coprophagia is an extremely difficult behavioural problem to correct. There are a variety of factors which contribute to the problem, and the causes may accumulate for some time before the behaviour commences. For this reason, the treatment must integrate a variety of approaches to the problem.

## HOW TO STOP STOOL EATING

There is no definitive treatment for stool-eating. The popular home remedies are seldom effective, but are easy to apply and may be worth a try. Some people find that "**certs**" added to the dog's food, will end the behaviour, presumably by making the stool taste bad. Others have had success adding either Forbid, a commercially available preparation of pancreatic enzymes, or meat tenderizer to the food.

The commonly recommended practice of **sprinkling the stool with tabasco sauce or red pepper rarely works**, and often makes the problem worse. If this approach is used, it is essential that absolutely every stool be doctored, or the dog will receive intermittent rewards if he occasionally manages to eat an untreated stool. This makes the behaviour even more difficult to eliminate, because the dog will keep trying in the hopes of getting an untreated stool, and obtaining the reward it provides.

**Punishment does not work**. It is impossible to punish within 1/2 a second of the dog ingesting the tasty morsel. The stool eating itself is rewarding to dogs.



## THE MOST SUCCESSFUL METHODS TO STOP STOOL EATING

The most important part of any training program is **ensuring that the dog will never again have a chance to eat stool**. You must completely prevent access to the stool. This might mean that you have to take the dog out on a leash to do his business, then clean it up before he is allowed out unattended. Some people find that a muzzle is a good investment, and the dog is muzzled every time he is out in the yard alone. If you enjoy training, you could also teach your dog to **defecate on command**, so that you are always present when he eliminates and can therefore supervise the act. It is also possible to **train the dog to come directly to you at the end of each defecation**, so that you can put the dog inside and clean up each time he has a bowel movement. Whatever method you choose, it is **important that the stool eating be prevented for long enough** to allow the behaviour to go into extinction. This will take **at least one month, and often requires several months**.

The **dog's diet must be assessed**. Diets high in starch and carbohydrates, and low in fibre, tend to encourage coprophagia, so you might need to **switch your pet to a diet high in fat, fibre and protein, and low in carbohydrates**. Fat, protein, and fibre tend to satisfy hunger longer, removing that particular stimulus for stool eating.

The dog should not be fed any treats or table food. His meals should be regularly scheduled, in the morning and at dinner time. The **regular timing of meals helps to suppress the appetite at other times of the day**. **Make sure you are feeding enough food** for your dog's activity level.

If the above diet alterations are unsuccessful, we have had some success by changing the diet to a commercially available, high fibre diet. The stool tends to become very dry and flaky on this type of diet. This alters the mouth feel of the stool, which significantly reduces palatability. The major drawback of this approach is that the high fibre diet means that there is significantly more stool produced for you to clean up. Additionally, when the dog is returned to the reduced fibre diet, the stool eating may resume. One should not feed a high fibre diet to a growing puppy.

Unfortunately, there is no foolproof treatment for the problem of coprophagia. We have had more success with **diet alteration and preventing access** than with any of the other approaches. However, you may need to combine several of the above approaches to deal with your dog's problem. As the dog grows older (over one year of age), the inherited drive to perform coprophagia generally decreases.

We are here to help you in whatever way we can, so please call if you have any problems or questions. We are interested in your success, or lack of it, as your experience will help us to develop more reliable methods for correcting this problem.