



Coprophagia

Coprophagia describes a condition where a dog may ingest their own faeces, the faeces of another dog or even another animal. Coprophagia is usually more troublesome for pet owners, than it is harmful to the dog. Coprophagia can be a behavioural issue but may also occur with numerous medical problems. Medical problems must be first ruled out before a purely behavioural diagnosis can be made.

Coprophagia can be a normal behaviour especially in nursing bitches to keep the puppies and the den clean. Puppies may also ingest their own faeces, presumably to help establish gut flora. Outside of these two circumstances, coprophagia is not a normal behaviour and may be associated with a poor diet, a medical condition and/or a behavioural issue.



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As there can be numerous causes for coprophagia, it is important to consult your veterinarian. At a minimum your veterinarian may perform a physical and faecal examination on your dog. Faecal examinations are important to assess for parasites but may also provide clues of a digestive issue in your dog (e.g. undigested nutrients such as fats, may be discovered on faecal examination). Any circumstance that alters the way food is digested and how nutrients are absorbed can lead to coprophagia. For example, internal parasites that reside in the bowel interfere with digestion and reduce nutrient absorption. Roundworms, hookworms, whipworms and Giardia are parasites frequently found in faecal examinations at kennels where coprophagia is confirmed. If multiple dogs are affected in a kennel environment, mixing faecal samples from several dogs will increase the probability of identifying the parasites involved.

Medical issues relating to the pancreas or gastrointestinal tract can affect the digestion of food and have been associated with coprophagia. Your veterinarian may want to perform further tests to assess their function.

Behavioural problems

Coprophagia has been associated with many behavioural issues including but not limited to attention seeking behaviour, anxiety, lack of enrichment, environmental stress and as a learned behaviour from another dog in the household who is coprophagic.

Feeding habits can play a role too. Heavily restricted food rations in dogs on weight loss programs may result in the consumption of a dog's own faeces driven by hunger. On the other hand, over eating may also drive coprophagia. A good example is where several dogs are fed at the same time in a kennel environment. The competition at feeding time can speed up ingestion and in some dogs could result in the overconsumption of food. Too much food eaten quickly can accelerate the movement of food through the bowel, leading to the poor assimilation of nutrients.

Consequently, undigested nutrients can be found in the faeces and may make the faecal matter more palatable to the dog.

Stress, related to kennel conditions or an external stressful event (e.g. a thunderstorm) can also initiate this behavioural problem.

What should I do if my dog is coprophagic?

It is imperative that you consult your veterinarian. Medical causes should always be identified and treated. If a medical cause is ruled out, your veterinarian will be able to suggest some behavioural strategies to help and may prescribe products that can be applied to the faeces for example, to help with taste aversion.

The behavioural strategies your veterinarian may suggest could be based around avoiding the opportunity for your dog to ingest faeces, redirecting your dog's attention or encourage teaching an alternate behaviour altogether. Your veterinarian will be able to advise what will work best for your dog. Ensure you speak to your veterinarian about ways to enrich your dog's environment to provide more stimulation throughout the day as this can be helpful.

Take home messages

- Coprophagia is only considered a normal behaviour in nursing bitches and young puppies.
- Coprophagia has been associated with medical causes relating to the pancreas and gastrointestinal system (e.g. intestinal parasites).
- Numerous behavioural causes exist for coprophagia that are considered possible once a medical cause is ruled out.
- Your veterinarian should always be consulted in the case of coprophagia. They will be able to identify and treat any medical causes and provide appropriate behavioural advice for your dog where necessary.

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