

UNDERSTANDING COPROPHAGIA, THE MEDICAL TERM FOR STOOL-EATING

What could possibly be the attraction of dog poop? Although not readily talked about by most dog owners, stool-eating is not an unusual problem nor is it abnormal for dogs. Often, though, owners are reluctant or embarrassed to talk about this behavior.

Nursing females, activated by their genetic survival instinct, ingest the feces of their puppies until the pups are weaned to keep the nesting area clean. Puppies may consume feces because they are curious and they go through a phase in exploring their world of putting everything in their mouth. Most puppies lose interest, but some don't. If not, then it may become a problem for the owner that they consider disgusting, particularly when the dog saunters up, tail wagging, looking for a some kind words or to give the owner a kiss, or goes inside the house and upchucks what he/she just ate!

There are several variations of this behavior:

- Dogs that eat only their own stool

- Dogs that eat only other dog's stool

- Dogs that eat stool only when frozen solid (in the winter)

- Dogs that eat only the stool of other species (often the cat litter box)

If the behavior persists into adulthood or after the female no longer has her puppies, there are several causes offered by professionals—a nutritional deficiency; dry food vs wet food; an inadequate lifestyle enrichment program; a natural, hard-wired instinct; or a combination of these factors. A modification in either of these areas may correct the behavior.

Some remedies that have been suggested to stop this practice, which may or may not work, include:

- Adding a commercial product called Forbid, meat tenderizer, crushed breath mints, pineapple, raw liver, or zucchini to the dog's food or having the owner doctor up the stools with a variety of things that may make it undesirable to the dog (such as Tabasco sauce).

The remedies found to work best are:

- Picking up all the available stools, teaching the dog the LEAVE IT command (both which require the owner being with the dog) or denying access by design. Also, the condition may respond to therapy with anti-obsessional drugs.

For behavior modification assistance, contact the Humane Society's Pet Behavior Help Line, 388-3331, Ext. 19, or www.hsvb.org (Pet Behavior downloads)

The Humane Society offers three Puppy & Dog Training Classes each week—Wednesday at 11AM, Thursday at 7PM and Saturday at 1 PM. The class is a 6-week session; each once-a-week class is about 1 hour. For information contact Connie at 772-388-3331, Ext. 19.