

Of all the repulsive habits our dogs have—drinking from the toilet, rolling in swamp muck, licking their butts— nothing disgusts most owners more than pondering why dogs eat poop. Their motivation may not be to gross us humans out, but it certainly does. So much so, in fact, that discovering that your dog eats poop is often cited as a reason people try to rehome a dog or even opt for [euthanasia](#).

There's a scientific name for this poop-eating habit— *coprophagia* (*kop-ruh-fey-jee-uh*)—and also both behavioral and physiological reasons why some dogs view poop as a delicacy. If you have a poop eater, don't despair. There are [ways to discourage the habit](#) and even some [over-the-counter solutions](#). Although not deeply probed by science — there are few studies on it — poop eating is a relatively common phenomenon in dogs. In a [2012 study](#) presented at the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior annual conference, researchers led by Dr. Benjamin Hart, from the University of California, Davis, found that:

- 16 percent (one in six) of dogs are classified as “serious” dog poop eaters, which means that they were caught in the act five times
- 24 percent of the dogs in the study (one in four) were observed eating poop at least once

Hart wrote, “Our conclusion is that eating of fresh stools is a reflection of an innate predisposition of ancestral canids living in nature that protects pack members from intestinal parasites present in feces that could occasionally be dropped in the den/rest area.” Translation: It's in a dog's DNA to eat poop.

The study consisted of two separate surveys sent to about 3,000 dog owners. While eating poop is repulsive to human sensibilities, it's not really all that bad from a canine point of view. Dogs evolved as scavengers, eating whatever they found on the ground or in the trash heap, so their ideas of haute cuisine are somewhat different from ours. In his [Handbook of Applied Dog Behavior and Training](#), animal behaviorist Steven R. Lindsay says, that coprophagia “may be one of several appetitive survival behaviors that have evolved to cope with the periodic adversity of starvation.” In other words, when food is scarce, you can't be picky.

## Poop Eating Is Normal for Dogs and Puppies

For some species, such as rabbits, eating poop is a totally normal way of [obtaining key nutrients](#). In fact, if you prevent rabbits from doing this, they will develop health problems, and young rabbits will fail to thrive. Fortunately, dogs do not need to get nutrition this way. Poop eating, however, is a normal, natural canine behavior at some life stages.

Mother dogs will lick their puppies to urge them to eliminate, and clean up their poop by eating it, for about the first three weeks after birth. Puppies will also naturally engage in this behavior, eating their own poop (*autocoprophagia*), poop from other dogs (*allocoprophagia*), as well as poop from cats and other animals. Some dogs find horse manure and goose droppings

particularly appealing. Eating their own poop is harmless, but consuming poop from other animals may cause health problems if the stool is contaminated with parasites, viruses, or toxins. In most cases, this behavior will fade before the puppy is about nine months old.

## Facts About Dogs Who Eat Poop

When it occurs in puppies, coprophagia (aka poop eating) is generally considered part of the process of exploring the world around them. Most puppies will be satisfied with a sniff, but a few will want—like human children—to put everything in their mouths, including poop. One bizarre fact: Dogs will rarely eat soft, poorly formed stools or diarrhea. They appear to be attracted mainly to hard stools. Frozen poop, in particular, is gulped down with relish! (There is a reason why dog owners have coined the term “poopsicle.”) In his study, Hart made some other observations about why dogs eat poop:

- Coprophagia was **more common in multi-dog households**. In single-dog homes, only 20 percent of dogs had the habit of eating poop, while in homes with three dogs, that rose to 33 percent
- Poop eaters are **no harder to house train** than any other dogs
- **Female dogs are more likely to eat poop**, and intact males were least likely
- 92 percent of poop eaters **want fresh stuff, only one to two days old**
- 85 percent of dog poop eaters **will not eat their own feces**, only poop from other dogs
- Greedy eaters—**dogs who steal food off tables**—tend to poop eaters

## Why Do Dogs Eat Poop?

If your adult dog starts to eat poop, **you should consult with your vet to rule out health problems** like:

- Parasites
- Diets **deficient in nutrients** and calories (your vet may suggest **supplements**)
- Malabsorption syndromes
- Diabetes, **Cushing's**, thyroid disease, and other conditions that might cause an increase in appetite
- Drugs, such as steroids

In many cases, dogs start to eat their own poop because of some kind of environmental stress or behavioral triggers, including:

- **Isolation:** Studies have shown that dogs who are kept alone in kennels or basements are more likely to eat poop than those dogs who live close to their people.
- **Restrictive confinement:** Spending too much time confined in a small space can cause a poop-eating problem. It's not unusual to see coprophagia in dogs rescued from crowded shelters.
- **Anxiety:** Often a result of a person using punishment or harsh methods during [house training](#). According to this theory, dogs may eliminate and then eat their own poop to get rid of the evidence, but then they are punished more. It becomes a vicious cycle.
- **Attention-seeking:** Dogs eat their own poop to get a reaction from their humans, which they inevitably will. So if you see your dog is eating poop, don't overreact.
- **Inappropriate association with real food:** Dogs who are fed in proximity to their poop may make a connection between the odors of food and those of feces and will be unable to tell the difference.
- **Scenting it on their mothers:** Lindsay writes that in some cases, puppies will get confused by sniffing fecal odors on their mother's breath after she has cleaned them. Also, sometimes mothers may regurgitate food that is mixed with puppy fecal matter. He calls this an "appetitive inoculation," which may set a puppy up to develop this bad habit.
- **Living with a sick or elderly dog:** Sometimes a healthy dog will consume poop from a weaker dog in the household, especially in cases of fecal incontinence. Scientists hypothesize that this may be related to the instinct to protect the pack from predators.

## How to Stop a Dog From Eating Poop

Veterinarians and dog owners have seen improvements in dogs who eat poop with a few strategies, including:

- **Vitamin supplementation:** There's been a long-standing theory that dogs eat poop because they are missing something in their diets, so a [dog multivitamin](#) could be helpful. Vitamin-B deficiency, in particular, has been a prime suspect, and studies have backed this up. In 1981, scientists showed fecal microbial activity synthesized thiamine, a B-vitamin. Other research found other missing nutrients.
- **Enzyme supplementation:** The modern canine diet is higher in carbohydrates and lower in meat-based proteins and fats than the canine ancestral diet. Some people have had success with supplements for dogs that contain [papain, an enzyme that aids digestion](#).
- **Taste-aversion products:** The theory is that certain tastes and smells are as disgusting to dogs as the idea of stool eating is to us, so adding a [poop-eating deterrent](#) to food or treats will make the poop that's being produced less appealing. Many of these products contain monosodium glutamate, chamomile, pepper-plant derivatives, yucca, garlic, and parsley. Just remember to treat all the dogs in a multi-dog household if there's a poop-eating problem! Some owners will also use a [bitter-tasting spray](#) to make poop taste worse.

Perhaps the best way to stop the problem is through training and environmental management methods, including:

- Have **all the right equipment** for feeding, training, and walking your dog.
- **Keep the dog's living area clean**, including the yard, so there will be no piles of poop for him to eat.
- Cat owners should **keep the litter box clean or out of the dog's reach**.
- **Supervise your dog on walks**, and pick up their poop immediately.
- Training. **Work hard on the cues "leave it" and "come."** One simple exercise is to teach your dog to come to you for a food treat as soon as he has pooped. That way, the dog will develop a habit of paying attention to you for a tasty tidbit, instead of turning toward the revolting one on the ground.