

Holistic science in veterinary medicine, animal husbandry and management

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

COPROPHAGY IN DOGS

Coprophagia is considered to be 'unmentionable' and largely because of this, the incidence of the condition is relatively difficult to establish. Most people do not see this habit as being something which they should consult their vet about. There are different types of types of coprophagia. Autocoprophagia means an animal eating its own faeces; intraspecific coprophagia, which means eating faeces from another animal within its own species; interspecific coprophagia, which means eating faeces from another species (dog eating cat, deer, rabbit, etc faeces).

There seems to be no simple explanation why dogs develop this habit, which to most owners seems simply revolting and quite bizarre. This attitude is quite understandable because faeces contain substances which the body is trying to get rid of, – so why on earth should dogs try and eat them again? Despite the revulsion we have for this habit, the reality is that in most cases it probably does dogs no harm and in some circumstances may be useful. Like other unsociable habits in dogs, it helps to understand the cause of the behaviour.

Mothers will stimulate defecation in her puppies with her tongue and then consume the faeces. This activity keeps the nest clean and removes odours which may make it attractive to predators. It is often seen in other species. Newborn pups cannot voluntarily relax their sphincters until later in life and they may begin to eat their stools when their mother no longer performs the task. This habit may therefore persist beyond the early phase of puppy hood and when placed in a new home, but in most cases it will disappear quite naturally.

Many theories are put forward as to why the habit persists. Occasionally it is associated with underlying medical problems such as pancreatic insufficiency, pancreatitis, intestinal infections, malabsorptive syndromes, and over-feeding (especially high fat content diets). It is highly unlikely though that coprophagia is the only symptom in such cases and many other problems will be noticed including predominantly, diarrhea. Coprophagia is usually only a small aspect of these medical conditions.

More commonly the problem is not associated with a diagnosable condition or disease even though there may be a bio-chemical association. One theory is that the dog may be lacking in natural micronutrients such as vitamins, which could explain why they find droppings from cows or sheep and other

herbivores attractive. Another theory is that they find the chemical appetite enhancers found in some dog foods attractive, even though they have been through another dog's digestive system. Yet another is that if the dog is not being given fresh or 'wet' meat it may be attracted to the smell of the faeces of a dog that is. Yet another is that they are trying to introduce beneficial bacteria into their digestive systems as most dog foods are almost sterile. Certain breeds and strains seem to be more susceptible the habit than others.

Behavioural theories are also put forward. These include attention-seeking, as when the dog engages in coprophagia, their owner tends to reprimand it and, therefore, pay attention to the animal. It seems unlikely that this is the case with well cared for animals as the dog would get love and attention anyway. Also, (oddly, I feel) it is associated with allelomimetic behaviour, which is where the dog observes the owner picking up the faeces and learns from them to do so as well.

Various cures are used for the condition with varying success. Food additives are often used; these include pineapple as well as other citrus flavours together with other things such as pumpkin seeds, peppermint, papaya, and anise seed. Another remedy is to garnish the faeces with something the dog finds distasteful such as vinegar or spring onion juice, but make sure your dog does not like these before you try it – he may regard these as a garnish for his sausages! Be sure also to clean up your dogs droppings promptly if he has unsupervised access to the place where he empties himself, he may behave himself when you are there and then Hoover them up when you are not looking.

Training the dog not to engage in intraspecific or interspecific coprophagia when out walking is an option. Walk the dog on a lead past the temptation, let him sniff it and growl 'NO' at him. If your voice has little effect, chide him further in your usual way. When he stops taking notice of the temptation praise him and walk on. Keep on returning to the same or other faeces in the same way, and repeat the operation if he takes an interest until he gets the idea. Sometimes, if you can get the dog to stop eating faeces for a month or so it breaks the habit.

An essential part of the treatment for the condition is a change to Natural Feeding. Natural Feeding using home cooking, or using BAHNM Certified Holistic Products, reflects the natural diet and therefore avoids the lack of appropriate micronutrients, which is often associated with the habit. In many cases it will remove the problem altogether.

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