

A Most Disturbing Habit
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One of the more puzzling behavior patterns of concern to owners is that of stool eating. Few behaviors evoke more disgusting reactions from most humans. The scientific name for this behavior is coprophagia, and behaviorists are still not sure whether or not this is normal behavior for dogs.

Examples of the many different hypotheses that have been suggested as to the motivation for the behavior are: it is due to an unidentified nutritional deficit, it is a remnant of the maternal behavior of dams eating their puppies' feces to keep the nest area clean, dogs do it because they are bored, or they are mimicking the owner's behavior of picking up stools when they clean up the yard. We have also seen it in dogs who are very food-motivated.

All of these ideas have arguments against their validity. For example, males engage in the behavior, as do females who have never had a litter, and dogs who spend very little time outside and have active social lives do it as well. In addition, the behavior has never been described in cats, although if any of the above ideas were valid, cats should be expected to be stool eaters as well. However, Dr. Patsy Mich, a veterinarian at Care Animal Hospital in Arvada, Colorado points out that in rare cases, coprophagy can be a symptom of diseases such as pancreatic insufficiency or malabsorption.

The health risks to the dog depend on whose stool is being eaten. A parasite free dog who is eating her own stool or that of another uninfected dog is not at risk. However, Dr. Mich also says that if a dog is coprophagic and has a parasite such as giardia, self-reinfection will occur. Dogs can also become infected with parasites such as roundworms or coccidia from eating another infected dog's stool.

Although cats and dogs are generally infected by different species of parasites, one type of roundworm is transmissible to dogs by eating cat feces. The greatest risk comes when a dog eats stools she finds outside of her own yard - those from unidentified animals whose medical histories are unknown.

Any dog who is coprophagic needs to be examined by a veterinarian - not only to rule out medical causes, but also to have a fecal examination to test for parasites. Stay tuned for a discussion of potential solutions to this problem.