

Living With the Disturbing Habit
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Last time we talked about causes and concerns about coprophagia - stool eating. If the dog is healthy and parasite free, coprophagy may be more of a concern for the owner than for the dog. People don't like to think of getting close to a dog who has eaten poop, especially if the dog has "poop-breath"! Some dogs are also known to eat feces and then vomit - usually on the most expensive rug in the house.

Because the reasons for coprophagy are not known, stopping the behavior can be difficult. A variety of commercial products (most contain MSG) are available which, when added to the dog's food, supposedly make the stool taste bad. Results with these products vary. It makes no difference at all in some cases, but stops the behavior in others. When these products are effective, they remain so only as long as the supplement is added to the food.

Unpleasant tasting substances such as cayenne pepper or vinegar can also be put directly onto the stools. Some dogs seem to like them even better this way, although this approach can be effective with some dogs. Changing foods, under the direction of a veterinarian, to a more palatable, higher calorie food sometimes is helpful as well.

Another approach is to remotely punish the dog, using anything from a remote controlled citronella collar to a loud, startling noise whenever she engages in stool eating. This is a time-intensive method as the dog must constantly be monitored, so that the punishment is consistently delivered until the behavior stops. The dog should not connect the owner's presence with the punishment. It might be less trouble to just pick up the feces more frequently.

A coprophagic dog could also be muzzled for short time periods when left outside. This works best if the dog is eating stool immediately after defecating. The owner can then pick up the stool and remove the muzzle. It is not a good idea to leave a dog muzzled for long time periods or unsupervised.

Some behaviorists have experimented with taste aversion conditioning. A substance is hidden in the stool that makes the dog vomit immediately after eating it. Results with this approach have also varied, stopping the behavior in some cases, while it resumed in others when the stools were no longer treated.

In some cases a little humor goes a long way. Miss Ashley, our young Dalmatian who is our Queen of Bad Habits is coprophagic, and we refer to her winter "treats" as "poop-sicles"! We also decided to treat the behavior from the other end - we add a doggie breath freshener to her water! Life is too short to worry about everything!