

Ask A Vet: Dog's Disgusting Behavior Needs Addressing

Sunday, February 5, 2017

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

Recently, our young German Shepherd Dog, Fritzly, has been behaving in a manner that is concerning at best. We've not noticed this before, but it seems that if we're not keeping a close watch on her while she's out, she will eat her own poop. Once, we even caught her eating the poop of her housemate, while he was pooping! We are at a loss and profoundly grossed out. Do you have any advice?

-Grossed out in Goshen

Dear Reader,

First, what you're describing is not uncommon and you are not alone in this struggle. The act of eating poop, termed coprophagia, is something that many pet owners have dealt with. The cause of coprophagia in dogs isn't something that is easily diagnosed, and there isn't a single reliable fix to the problem. Most often, coprophagia is nothing more than a behavioral nuisance. However, it can signal medical abnormalities, and it can promote the spread of disease. Because of this, if your animal frequently eating its poop, it is worth investigating, and there are steps that can be taken to help you and your veterinarian get to the bottom of things.

In both young dogs and adults, coprophagia can be a sign of malnutrition or nutritional deficiencies. This can be caused by food intolerances, parasites, intestinal disorders, and even some hormonal disorders. When absorption of food is decreased, the dog may begin to demonstrate odd cravings and interests in unusual things. This is the dogs body trying to replenish deficiencies. Sometimes, this can manifest as poop eating. Additionally, if absorption in the intestines is decreased, more of the original food is passed in the feces. This can make the feces interesting to the dog and maybe even tasty (YUCK!). If your pup has loose stools, intermittent vomiting, or you're worried about malnutrition, it is best to see your primary veterinarian. Your vet will likely start with a physical exam, followed by checking the stool for parasites, and then bloodwork may be performed. If something else is suspected, additional testing may be recommended by the doctor.

Poop eating also has many behavioral causes. These can include things like puppies mimicking the poop eating that their mother does naturally to clean them, harmless investigation, seeking stimulation from the environment, and even just habit. If medical causes of coprophagia have been ruled out, changes in your pet's environment, along with behavior modification may be successful in eliminating the poop eating. The easiest fix to the problem is to simply remove fecal material from your pet's environment. This immediately eliminates both the impulse and the act of eating poop. Additionally, redirecting or correcting the behavior when seen may be beneficial in ultimately ridding your pup of coprophagia. Finally, making sure your pet has plenty of enrichment, including toys, activities, puzzle treats/kongs, walks, etc. This will ensure that your pet is well stimulated, reducing the need for her to seek stimulation elsewhere in her environment.

As always, thank you for your interest in Ask-A-Vet. We hope you find the information both useful and interesting!

-Dr. Kyle DeYoung