

Ask A Vet: Why Dogs Graze on Grass

Sunday, September 11, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I've noticed that my adult pit-bull seems to be eating a lot of grass whenever she's out. I've heard that dogs do this when they have upset stomachs, but she has always been healthy and kept up-to-date on vaccines and monthly preventatives. Could this just be normal behavior?

-Grazin' in Granger

Dear Grazin',

This is one of the most commonly asked questions in the exam room. The often prevailing conception amongst most pet owners is that dogs eat grass because they have an upset stomach. Though this idea isn't wrong, in most instances, normal canine behavior lies at the root of this leafy mystery.

A large UC Davis study revealed that nearly 70% of pet owners observe their pets eating vegetation at least weekly, if not daily. Only 8% of animals were observed by owners to have signs of illness prior to plant ingestion, and only around 20% were seen to vomit after ingestion. This suggests that the majority of pets eating plants were observably healthy.

Dogs, by nature, are omnivores, as are their wolf/wild dog ancestors. These wild ancestors consumed plants for nutrients, fiber, and as a means of "treating" themselves. It has been suggested that these ancestors used leafy foods in order to rid themselves of intestinal parasites – leaves are thought to have wrapped around intestinal parasites while increasing intestinal movement, thus pushing the parasites through the animals' digestive tracts. Like many of the traits we see in our furry companions, the drive to eat plants was likely passed down through the generations from their ancestors. In most instances the behavior is normal and completely benign.

However, plant eating should not be entirely dismissed. Even though your pet is receiving a balanced diet and has been dewormed in the past, there is still a possibility that grass eating indicates underlying disease. Certain signs/factors in conjunction with eating grass can indicate that a trip to your veterinarian is needed. These things include young age (puppies), raw diets, unknown or incomplete vaccine/deworming history, frequent vomiting before or after ingestion, diarrhea, weight loss, dull hair coat, or lethargy. Depending on the case, your veterinarian will likely check your pet's feces for parasites, perform bloodwork, and potentially look at x-rays for reasons that your pet may be eating grass. Medical reasons would include nutritional deficiencies, parasites, diarrhea, or other ailments that may be revealed by tests with your veterinarian. In most cases, a little bit of grazing, as long as the lawn hasn't been treated with chemicals, is completely safe. In fact, your pooch may appreciate the opportunity to soak up some sun and chomp some greens the way nature intended. However, if you notice any of the above signs or if you have any concern, it is always best to consult your veterinarian.

Thank you for the question and enjoy the coming Fall weather!

-Dr. Kyle DeYoung