The act of dogs consuming their own or other animals’ feces is known as coprophagia. Although it’s not known exactly why it occurs, coprophagia is a normal behavior in many species, including dogs. Ingesting one’s own or other dogs’ feces is particularly prevalent in puppies. Fortunately, many grow out of this behavior as they mature. Coprophagia is also normal in nursing mothers. Because pups are not able to eliminate on their own until they’re about three weeks old, a mother dog will lick her very young puppies to activate the defecation reflex. Ingestion of the puppies’ feces also keeps the nest clean. Feces left in the nest would cause poor hygiene and attract predators to an outside nest.

A few dogs continue to ingest their own or other dogs’ feces into adulthood. Some of these dogs are highly motivated and the behavior seems to become compulsive. Some dogs even follow others around, waiting until they defecate so that they can eat the feces right away. Dogs have also been reported to twist their bodies around so that they can eat their own feces as they are defecating. Despite much hypothesizing about nutritional deficiencies, there is no apparent reason for this strange behavior. Some suggest that dogs are more likely to develop this behavior if they live in an impoverished environment. In fact, dogs left for long periods in an area with droppings will often play with the feces by tossing them in the air. This behavior can contribute to the development of coprophagia.

Eating the feces of other species, particularly herbivores, is common among dogs and isn’t considered abnormal, just undesirable. Many dogs will also ingest human feces if given the opportunity. It’s possible that dogs get some nutritive value from such feces. Eating garbage and human feces is thought to be one function of dogs during their early domestication, some 12,000 to 15,000 years ago. They served as our first waste management workers, helping to keep the areas around human settlements clean. A study of village dogs in Zimbabwe revealed that feces
made up about 25% of the dogs’ overall diet, with human feces making up a large part of that percentage. Some suggest that dogs fed inadequate diets are more likely to engage in coprophagia, presumably to get any available nutrients. Many dogs will also ingest the feces of other carnivores, despite the fact that these feces are unlikely to be of nutritive value. Dogs are notorious for eating cat feces from litter boxes.

What Causes Coprophagia?

Normal Maternal Behavior

Nursing mothers regularly ingest their puppies’ feces because defecation is a reflex in young puppies that depends on the mother to activate. Voluntary defecation does not occur until the pups are about three weeks old. The mother’s ingestion of the feces also functions to keep the nest clean. Feces in the nest results in poor hygiene and may also attract predators to the nest.

Normal Puppy Behavior

It’s common for puppies to ingest feces, although the reason for this behavior is unknown. It may just be part of investigating their environment. Many puppies outgrow this behavior by six months of age with no intervention beyond mild discouragement.

Normal Behavior

Many species ingest their own or others animals’ feces if the feces are rich in nutrients. Herbivores, who eat only plants, are most likely to produce feces with nutritive value for dogs.

Unknown Reasons

It’s unknown why adult dogs, maintained on nutrient-rich, balanced diets, ingest their own feces or the feces of other carnivores. It’s believed that it’s part of the dog’s natural behavior in evolutionary history.

Medical Problems to Rule Out

Starvation, Malnutrition or Malabsorption Disorders

If your dog isn’t getting sufficient food or isn’t able to digest the nutrition in his food, he may resort to coprophagia as a way to supplement his diet. Before doing anything else, it’s important to have your dog thoroughly examined by a veterinarian to rule out medical problems that could cause coprophagia.

What to Do About Coprophagia

Resolving coprophagia can be challenging. Attempts to discourage any type of contact with feces are bound to fail because sniffing feces is such a fundamental investigative behavior in dogs. Drawing the line between sniffing and eating is not easy. If the behavior has developed into a compulsive disorder, in addition to avoiding access to feces or discouraging ingestion, it’s important to provide environmental enrichment, such as toys and games like fetch and tug, and adequate physical exercise. It may also be advisable to incorporate medication. Please see our article, Compulsive Behavior in Dogs [1], for general recommendations for compulsive
If you’d like help with your dog’s coprophagia, don’t hesitate to call in the professionals. Please see our article, Finding Professional Help [2], for information about locating a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB), a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB) or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT) in your area.

Ingesting Own Feces or Other Family Dogs’ Feces

- Make sure your dog is getting a quality, highly digestible diet to ensure that he’s not attracted to partially digested food in the feces. You usually can’t find high-quality dog kibble in supermarkets and grocery stores. Instead, locate a quality pet supply store in your area and look for premium brands with human-grade ingredients. Read the back of dog food bags, and pick a brand that lists one or more whole meat sources and not meat by-products as the first ingredient.
- Accompany your dog to the yard and clean up feces immediately. If you have multiple dogs, be sure to clean up after all of them, even if only one eats feces.
- Teach your dogs to defecate in one specific area, and don’t allow them access to that area except for defecation. (To learn how to train your dogs to eliminate in only one area, please see our article, Teaching Your Dog to Eliminate in a Specific Place [3].)
- Teach your dog the “Leave it” cue. This cue can be used to discourage contact with any item, including feces. Please see our article, Teaching Your Dog to “Leave It,” [4] for more information.
- Use taste deterrents on feces. Try finely ground black pepper, crushed hot pepper, Tabasco® sauce, or Grannick’s Bitter Apple® spray or gel. You must apply the deterrent consistently to all feces that your dog can access for a significant period of time so that he comes to expect that all feces taste horrible. You may need to use the deterrent weeks or even months, depending on the length of time the coprophagia has been going on. For this treatment to be most effective, you will need to restrict your dog’s access to water for 10 to 20 minutes after he has tasted the deterrent. Otherwise, he may just drink water to counteract the bad taste. The effects of this treatment can fade over time, so you’ll need to reimplement it periodically. For more detailed information, please see our article, Using Taste Deterrents [5].
- There are commercially available taste deterrents that you can add to your dog’s diet to make his feces taste unappetizing, such as For-bid™ and Deter™. These products contain similar ingredients to those found in meat tenderizers, and you should check with your veterinarian to determine if they are safe for your dog. There are anecdotal reports that feeding dogs pineapple or foods that contain sulfur, such as brussels sprouts or cabbage, renders the feces less palatable. Consult with your veterinarian before adjusting your dog’s diet for more than a day or two.
- Try a punishment device that you can use remotely (at a distance from your dog), such as a loud air horn or a citronella or air pressure remote-controlled collar. (If you choose a collar, your dog should get used to wearing it in the context in which the coprophagia occurs for 10 to 14 days. This will minimize the likelihood that he’ll associate the punishment with the collar. Position yourself where you can observe your dog from a distance or without being seen. Ideally, you want him to be unaware of your presence. Watch carefully when you see your dog sniff feces. The instant you see him open his mouth, blast the air horn or activate the collar. If timed correctly, your dog will startle and leap away from the feces. You’ll need
to apply this punishment every time he attempts to eat feces, and you’ll need to persist until he shows clear avoidance of feces for several weeks. To do this, you’ll have to supervise all his outings. Even then, over time your dog will likely regress, and you’ll need to reimplement the punishment periodically.

- Implement a taste aversion conditioning procedure. Taste aversion works by making your dog feel sick without inducing vomiting. It’s different than using a taste deterrent or remote punishment, and it may be effective to reduce coprophagia. Taste aversion treatment requires the guidance of a professional. Please see our article, Finding Professional Help [2], for information about locating a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist or a veterinary behaviorist in your area.

Ingesting Feces of Dogs or Other Species in Public Places

- Keep your dog on a leash when you’re in places where he might encounter other dogs’ feces. Pay attention to your dog and lead him away from any feces he discovers.
- Teach your dog a reliable recall cue (e.g., come) so that you can always call him away when you see him investigating a pile of feces.
- Teach your dog the “Leave it” cue. This cue can be used to discourage contact with any item, including feces. Please see our article, Teaching Your Dog to “Leave It,” [4] for more information.
- Each time you plan to take your dog to the park, go along the route first and plant a series of feces piles laced with a taste deterrent, such as finely ground black pepper, crushed hot pepper, Tabasco® sauce, or Grannick’s Bitter Apple® spray or gel. You must apply the deterrent consistently to all feces that your dog can access for a significant period of time so that he comes to expect that all feces taste horrible. You may need to use the deterrent weeks or even months, depending on the length of time the coprophagia has been going on. Take your dog along the route (on- or off-leash) and, each time he approaches and sniffs a pile of the laced feces, verbally warn him off by saying “Leave it” or some other cue. Allow your dog to taste the feces. The goal is for him to learn that when you give the verbal warning, the feces he’s investigating are bound to taste bad. The effects of this treatment can fade over time, so you’ll need to reimplement the procedure periodically. For more detailed information, please see our article, Using Taste Deterrents [5].
- Try a punishment device that you can use remotely, such as a loud air horn or a citronella or air pressure remote-controlled collar. If you choose a collar, your dog should wear it in the context in which the coprophagia occurs for 10 to 14 days. This will get your dog used to wearing it, and will minimize the likelihood that he’ll associate the punishment with the collar. Once your dog is accustomed to the collar, take him to an area where you think you’ll find dog feces. Watch carefully when you see your dog sniff feces. The instant you see him open his mouth to eat it, blast the air horn or activate the collar. If timed correctly, your dog will startle and leap away from the feces. You’ll need to apply this punisher every time your dog attempts to eat feces and persist until he shows clear avoidance of feces for several weeks. Even then, over time your dog will likely regress, and you’ll need to reimplement the punishment periodically.
- Implement a taste aversion conditioning procedure. Taste aversion treatment requires the guidance of a professional. Please see our article, Finding Professional Help [2], for information about locating a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist or a veterinary behaviorist in your area.
Raiding the Cat Litter Box

- Use a dog-proof litter box, such as a top-entry cabinet box.
- Place the litter box(es) in a room that you can gate off in some way so that your cat has access but your dog does not. You can use a cat door or a baby gate that the cat can climb over or under but your dog can’t. You can use an accordion-style gate that has openings large enough for your cat but not your dog.
- Use a hooded litter box so that your dog can’t get his head into the box. Be aware, however, that some cats dislike hooded boxes and will refuse to use them.
- Place booby traps near or in the litter box(es) that startle your dog and keep him away. Empty soda cans positioned above the box so that your dog knocks them over, a motion-activated alarm and Snappy Trainers™ all work well. Be aware that you can only implement this procedure for specific periods of time when your dog has access but your cat is confined away from the box. Otherwise, you risk startling your cat and discouraging him from using the litter box. There are also indoor dog containment systems available that activate a citronella collar whenever your dog approaches the system’s movable base, and you could place this base near the litter box.
- Use a taste deterrent on your cat’s feces, such as finely ground black pepper, crushed hot pepper, Tabasco® sauce, or Grannick’s Bitter Apple® spray or gel. You must apply the deterrent consistently to the feces for a significant period of time so that he comes to expect that all cat feces taste horrible. You may need to use the deterrent weeks or even months, depending on the length of time the coprophagia has been going on. For this treatment to be most effective, you will need to restrict your dog’s access to water for 10 to 20 minutes after he has tasted the deterrent. Otherwise, he may just drink water to counteract its effect. Do NOT use any type of verbal warning or else your dog will learn that the cat litter box is fair game unless you’re watching him. For more detailed information, please see our article, Using Taste Deterrents.
- Try a punishment device that you can use remotely, such as a loud air horn or a citronella or air pressure remote-controlled collar. (If you use a collar, your dog should wear it in the context in which the coprophagia occurs for 10 to 14 days before you start using it. Your dog will get used to wearing the collar, and this will minimize the likelihood that he’ll associate the punishment with wearing it.) Position yourself where you can observe your dog from a distance or without being seen. Ideally, you want him to be unaware of your presence. The instant you see your dog place his head in the litter box, blast the air horn or activate the collar. If timed correctly, your dog will startle and leap away from the box. You’ll need to apply this punishment every time your dog attempts to eat cat feces and persist until he shows clear avoidance of the box for several weeks.
- Implement a taste aversion conditioning procedure. Taste aversion treatment requires the guidance of a professional. Please see our article, Finding Professional Help, for information about locating a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist or a veterinary behaviorist in your area.

What NOT to Do

- Do not rub your dog’s nose in feces. This procedure won’t fix the problem and might make your dog frightened of you.
- Do not physically punish your dog for eating feces. Hitting him with a newspaper or spanking him probably won’t stop him from eating feces, and it might cause more serious
problems, such as fear or aggression.

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