

Coprophagia:

the consumption of faeces. From the Greek copros (“faeces”) and phagein (“to eat”).

The act of eating faeces is split into three groups:

- Autocoprophagia is when the dog eats its own faeces
- Intraspecific coprophagia is when the dog eats the faeces of other dogs only
- Interspecific coprophagia is when the dog eats the faeces of other animals (deer, cat etc)

Coprophagia is a common occurrence in dogs and although socially unacceptable for humans (and particularly unpleasant if the dog often licks people) it is quite normal for dogs. The behaviour in dogs is innate, particularly for female dogs.

A female dog is genetically programmed to care for her young and part of this is keeping the den clean. She will eat the faeces of the young pups in order to keep the den clean and prevent disease. This trait is present in all dogs (as male dogs do also assist in the cleaning of the den – interestingly enough for predatory rather than paternal reasons, in order to reduce the scent and therefore attraction to predators) and a number of things can trigger it.

What's the cause?

Unfortunately there is no one cause – much to the frustration of many dog owners. The most common possible causes include:

- **Stress**
Normally stemming from harsh or excessive punishment, the dog reverts back to puppy-like activities which act as a comfort blanket.
- **Hunger**
Dogs are opportunists and food-driven breeds like Labradors will always see the appeal given the chance! Our canine friends are genetically from wild stock who were scavengers and hunters: poo is just another food source. The waste product of dogs who are fed poor quality dog foods will be rich in preservatives.
- **Boredom**
If there's nothing for the dog to do and no stimulation, then it nearly always come down to trashing things and eating poo.
- **Vitamin deficiency**
The act of coprophagia may well be a natural physiological instinct to add minerals or vitamins deficient in its diet.
- **Puppyhood**
Puppies explore, much like human babies, with their mouths. It is extremely common for puppies to eat faeces and the vast majority grow out of the habit.



The Pineapple 'Myth'

I say 'myth' because I'm yet to find anyone who has had any success with this advice but there may well be someone who it has worked for. The 'myth' is that by feeding your dog pineapple, it will stop if from eating its own faeces. It's fairly logical as coprophagia is often caused by an enzyme deficiency and pineapple contains a proteolytic enzyme called bromelain. Bromelain breaks down proteins, acting as an aid to digestion.

How Do You Stop It?

Here are my top tips to quickly stop your dog eating faeces:

- Breaking a habit like coprophagia requires vigilance in order for it to be successful – keep a keen look out for your dog to make sure you get to them in time before it eats the faeces. It is probably worth keeping the dog on a lead in public areas (where irresponsible dog owners allow their dogs to foul) until you get the problem resolved as the key is prevention: preventing the dog from eating poo.
- Don't create a big drama, scold the dog or go over the top trying to prevent the dog getting the faeces: the dog will assume the faeces has high value and you will exacerbate the problem. Keep calm, use distraction techniques and praise highly for the dog ignoring the faeces and giving you attention instead.
- Teach a solid "off" or "leave it" cue using a training aide such as the Mikki discs, a plastic drinks bottle with some shingle inside or Pet Corrector. Use this cue to prevent the dog approaching the faeces and praise with a treat and fuss for leaving the faeces every time. You will soon break the dog's habit and it will learn that leaving the faeces means a treat!
- Clicker train your dog (see my Top Tips article on effective clicker training) and use distraction (like calling the dog's name) when it approaches faeces then use the clicker to reward the dog leaving the faeces.
- Ensure your dog is getting a healthy and balanced diet. There are obvious health benefits to this: take a look at The Canine Connection YouTube channel to watch me discussing the raw meat and bones diet, which is my recommended preference. You do pay for what you get and certainly pay for it in behaviour. Try feeding your dog two or three times a day to rule out hunger as a cause of coprophagia.

If your dog's habit is autocoprophagia:

- Keep a close eye on the dog and ensure you pick up its faeces as soon as the dog has toileted and make sure you keep your garden/toileting area clean or any faeces.
- Make sure you're feeding your dog enough (approximately 2% per day of his target weight); not too little or too much as feeding too much can also cause coprophagia as the dog tries to regulate its digestion.

There are also a range of commercial products available should you not have the time or inclination to train your dog. These chemically enhanced products make the dog's faeces taste unpleasant and therefore discourage the habit. Obviously this only works if your dog's habit is autocoprophagia. As with any aspect of dog training or behaviour modelling, I believe the process can not only achieve what you want more organically but enhance the bond and relationship you have with your dog also.



A Final Word of Warning

Although unpleasant, coprophagia is largely harmless. However, you must ensure your dog is kept well up to date with its vaccinations and worming regime. There is a high risk that the dog may ingest parasites through eating faeces and if not protected may become severely ill. It is a habit that is not just “nasty” but that does run very real health risks.

It may well take a month of your vigilance to break the habit but if there is no change in your dog’s habit, consult your vet to make sure there’s not an underlying health issue (dog’s often begin eating faeces when they have parasites or if they aren’t absorbing sufficient nutrients or problems with the pancreas.. A professional dog behaviourist will normally be recommended if there are no health issues to work on a structured behaviour program helping you solve the problem.

