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## Coprophagia – Stool Eating in Dogs

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### Introduction

Coprophagia is a surprisingly common problem, and whilst disgusting to us humans, it is a behaviour often enjoyed by dogs. This may manifest in the eating of the dog's own stools, those of other dogs or those of other species – especially horses and cattle. It is a problem for us because it is unhygienic and increases the risk of transmission of zoonotic infection (infection that can be passed from animals to humans). It also increases your dog's risk of intestinal worm infestation.

### A Medical or a Behavioural Problem?

Coprophagia tends to have roots in behaviour and potential causes include attention seeking, boredom, exploratory behaviour, copying and hunger. It seldom occurs as a result of nutritionally responsive disease. It is a common misconception that this behaviour usually occurs as a result of the diet lacking in nutrients. Coprophagia is a form of pica, which simply means "a depraved appetite." A dog with pica will often become obsessed with eating certain materials, and faeces are unfortunately a popular non-food item to ingest. This problem is more often than not, psychological, but there are some medical conditions which can give rise to such behaviour including primary gastrointestinal maldigestive and malabsorptive disorders such as exocrine pancreatic insufficiency, severe inflammatory bowel disease, intestinal lymphosarcoma. Hyperadrenocorticism and diabetes mellitus can cause an increased appetite to such an extent that a dog may look to non-food items to ingest. Anaemia (iron deficiency; which has a variety of underlying causes) may also be implicated. For this reason, it is always sensible to seek veterinary advice should an adult dog suddenly start eating faeces or other non-food items in order to rule out a medical problem. With the majority of these conditions, many other symptoms besides the coprophagia will be evident, particularly diarrhoea.

### Possible Causes

Coprophagia is normal when a bitch is nursing very young puppies. She will ingest their faeces whilst she is cleaning them and stimulating their bowel movements, and before domestication it would have been essential to keep the nest clean and to remove odours which could attract predators. Newborn puppies cannot voluntarily





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relax their sphincter muscles until later in life, and young puppies may begin eating their stools when the dam no longer performs the task.

Coprophagia is more common in young dogs and puppies under the age of a year, and in most cases, it is a habit that has arisen from natural behaviour which will be grown out of.

Coprophagia may arise as a result of hunger or boredom. In households where there is more than one dog, others will often copy the ringleader who has started the habit and it can be a difficult cycle to break. It does not necessarily indicate poor care or inadequate stimulation; some dogs are naturally more inquisitive than others and others are instinctively greedy.

Vitamin B and K deficiency have been implicated, but this is not proven, and is most likely to stem from cases in dogs with EPI where serum levels of B12 may be low and in cats where vitamin K may be deficient. In clinically healthy animals vitamin deficiency is very unlikely to be causative of coprophagia.

Excessive carbohydrate intake may possibly be linked but again there is no scientific evidence to support this. Carbohydrates are less digestible to canines, and poor quality grains may certainly have a low nutritional value, whilst grains with a high gluten content (e.g. wheat) are more common dietary allergens. These factors are possible contributing factors to conditions that could manifest in symptoms of coprophagia but are unlikely primary causes.

The Arden Grange recipes contain good levels of meat or fish as the primary protein source, and relatively low volumes of carefully balanced carbohydrates. Furthermore, all of the products are free from the 4 most common dietary allergens – wheat gluten, beef, soya and dairy products. Food allergies have close links with inflammatory bowel disease.

## *Resolving the Problem*

To help resolve the problem, it is first a good idea to weigh your dog, weigh out the amount of food given and check this against the feeding guidelines. Your dog's requirement for calories may have increased due to growth in a young animal or increased activity. If indicated, it is advised that the daily volume of food is raised. This should be done very gradually to avoid diarrhoea as a result of over-loading the digestive system with unaccustomed larger meals. Furthermore, at the opposite





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extreme, over-feeding may lead to undigested nutrients being passed, which could then make the stools more desirable to your dog.

If you are feeding once or twice a day, then increasing the frequency of feeding to 3 or even 4 smaller meals may also be helpful. This will stabilise your dog's blood sugar, which in turn will have a positive effect on serotonin levels. Serotonin is commonly called the dog's "happy hormone", but it also the hormone responsible for satiety. By eliminating any potential hunger, the likelihood of the coprophagia is reduced.

You can counteract boredom by making the environment more interesting. Activity feeding (e.g. from a Kong) and "finding food" games are particularly useful for keeping your dog both mentally and physically active. It is equally important to ensure that your dog gets adequate exercise each day so that he does not need to get rid of excess energy by exploring.

If your dog appears to be partaking in stool eating as a form of attention seeking, then the following steps can be taken:

- 1) Ensure your dog is kept on the lead prior to toileting so that you can move him away from the faeces whilst it is cleaned up.
- 2) Try to remain calm and reserved whilst your dog is around faeces and do not rush to pick up the mess. Some dogs see this as a game of "who can get there first".
- 3) Try rewarding your dog with lots of fuss and a food reward for coming away from the area. You will however need to ignore him if he is showing an interest in the faeces. If this is the case, try to refrain from talking to, shouting at, looking at, or even touching him. By withdrawing interaction, your dog should soon lose interest in the faecal matter.

If your dog appears to be copying another by eating faeces you will need to deal with the ring-leader first. Whilst the initial coprophagic dog is being treated for this behaviour, you should ensure that both dogs toilet at separate times. This should discourage the copycat.

With dogs that are interested in eating faeces for any reason, it can be useful to teach them a simple "off" command. You can also tempt them to move away from the area using a delicious treat, and so long as the treat is sufficiently tempting, then they should be happy to leave. Over time, they should associate leaving the faeces with reward and attention.





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## *Sustained Energy Release*

The carbohydrate ingredients in all of the Arden Grange recipes are carefully balanced to ensure a slow and steady energy release. The Arden Grange complete dry dog food range contains either a combination of rice, corn and beet pulp, rice, potato and beet pulp or potato and beet pulp. The beet pulp, which is a good source of both digestible and indigestible fibre, has the added benefit of lowering the overall position on the glycaemic index of the food in order to ensure sustained energy release throughout the day.

Corn has had unnecessarily bad press recently, but the corn used by Arden Grange is very highly digestible; over 80% in fact. This is achieved by ensuring that it is well ground before incorporating it into the recipe and making sure that correct extrusion temperatures are met during cooking. Particle size and heat affect digestibility. Corn is a good energy source, and is used in many of the Arden Grange recipes (along with beet pulp which is included in all of the products) because it has a lower position than rice on the glycaemic index.

With most owners feeding only once or twice a day - diets such as the Arden Grange range, which incorporate a carefully balanced combination of nutrients are the best choice for dogs with behavioural problems. Because stable blood sugar levels are promoted rather than glucose peaks and troughs, energy surges are avoided. This has a positive effect on the dog's serotonin level (also known as the happy or satisfaction hormone) which may help improve concentration and response to training. Many behaviourists recommend Arden Grange for this reason.

## *Deterrents*

It is never too late to break a bad habit, although you may need some help and support from a professional behaviourist if problems persist as it can be difficult to break the cycle of ingrained behaviours, especially if the problem has been going on for some time. It is recommended that faeces are immediately cleaned up to prevent them from being eaten, and try to limit as far as possible access to any other non-food items that your dog may turn his attention to as an alternative.

Some owners have found that old faeces sprinkled with chilli powder, pepper or grated orange zest have worked as a deterrent, whilst others have added a small amount of pineapple or grated courgette to the diet which is reported to give the faeces a very unpleasant taste to dogs.





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These suggestions are based on anecdotal rather than scientific evidence, but are harmless and worth trying. There have also been anecdotal reports that certain enzyme supplements may be beneficial in resolving coprophagia. These are reported to increase the absorption of the nutrients in the food. However, if your dog is fit and healthy and has normal digestive function then such supplementation should not be necessary. Furthermore, the Arden Grange complete dry recipes all contain nucleotides. These are a safe and natural ingredient (short chain proteins derived from yeast) which help to increase the surface area for absorption as well as facilitate the immune response to an outside challenge.

## Health & Hygiene

For reasons of hygiene we would suggest worming your dog more frequently if coprophagia is a problem. Always wash your hands with antibacterial soap after handling – when dogs lick themselves they'll transfer bacteria from their mouth to other parts of their body. Don't let your dog sleep in your bed, and never let him lick your face!

## Summary

To summarise, coprophagia is generally normal, but a bad habit which should be discouraged. A change of diet to a super-premium quality pet food such as Arden Grange may be beneficial if your dog is currently fed a less digestible brand that is not giving optimal nutrition nor satisfaction. It may be highly beneficial in cases of inflammatory bowel disease related to dietary allergies if the provocative ingredients are then eliminated from the diet. The Arden Grange Sensitive recipe may be suitable in the case of the latter, but it is strongly recommended that veterinary advice is taken if IBD is suspected.

## Caution

Please note that without being able to see your pet in his or her own environment that the advice we may be able to give is limited. If you are experiencing medical problems with your dog, please do seek veterinary advice, and in the case of behavioural problems we strongly recommend consulting a behaviourist.

## Further Info / Contact

If you would like any further information or assistance in selecting the optimal diet for your dog, please do not hesitate to contact us.





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