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The Inappetant Dog

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Introduction

It is always a concern when a dog fails to eat. There may be a dramatic change in appetite; e.g. a dog that has always eaten enthusiastically going off his food completely, or a gradual decline in interest towards a particular type of food. In any case, this is not a problem that can be ignored. It is vital that your dog eats enough to provide the energy and nutrients that are essential for his health and vitality. As owners, we also like to see our dogs enjoying their food, as this is an important part of the daily routine from which our pets should gain pleasure.

Ruling Out Medical Reasons for Inappetance

There are many reasons why a dog may become inappetant. The first consideration is that of his general clinical health. Loss of appetite may be an indication of illness. This may manifest alone, or with other symptoms, e.g. vomiting, diarrhoea, lethargy, signs of pains such as howling / whining or a 'tucked up' stance. Veterinary advice should always be sought in such cases. If a clean bill of health is given, you will at least have peace of mind in that medical causes for the loss of appetite have been ruled out.

Dental Problems

Dental problems are a common cause of inappetance, and can affect dogs of any age. They may range from inflamed gums (gingivitis) during teething or a retained deciduous (baby) tooth in the young dog to periodontal disease in the older animal. Animals with dental problems may benefit from having their kibble soaked, as a softer texture is kinder to a sore mouth, although teething puppies often appreciate something hard to chew. Ice cubes are popular and the coldness will help to alleviate inflammation. Veterinary advice should be sought if dental disease is suspected (additional signs may include bad breath, a hard yellow calculus build up on the teeth and reddened gums).

Fussy Eaters & Behaviour

Fussy eating can be down to behavioural issues. Your dog may be attention seeking, attempting to gain a tastier treat, have a fear associated with feeding and/or be experiencing unrest with other dogs in the household.





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Puppy Problems

Domestic dogs are an intelligent species. They are very quick to learn, and owners can easily (but inadvertently) train their pets to avoid eating dog food!

Inappetance is most common in adolescent dogs (from about 6-18 months), but can affect any age group of dogs – especially those with a predisposition to fussiness. There may be perfectly valid reasons for puppies to be disinterested in food. Leaving the dam and litter mates can be a stressful time for a young pup. There will also be lots of new people and maybe other pets to investigate, not to mention a whole new environment to explore. It is of little surprise in this case that food may not be quite so high on a pup's list of priorities. Inappetance is also common when puppies reach the age of 6 months or so and their growth rate begins to slow. Whereas their metabolic energy requirement would previously have been very much higher, the body's need for extra calories to support growth starts to wane.

Human Behaviour

When a dog leaves food, our natural reaction is concern - since we know that nutrition is vital for health. Once this starts to occur, well-meaning owners will often supplement the regular diet with extras in order to make the meal more interesting. Clever dogs then quickly begin to establish that they can eat the extras and leave the old food. Owners then draw the conclusion that the dog does not like the current pet food and will change to another product or brand. The dog may happily eat this for several days, weeks or months, but the chances are that it will only be a matter of time before this food too becomes uninteresting to them – or certainly not as tasty as the other little bits and pieces that may be offered to improve appetite. Quite soon, an owner will have tried numerous brands of dog food with varying degrees of success, and the dog will be dictating what is fed and when.

Attention Seeking

Your dog may have learnt that if he refuses to eat he will get a lot more attention and fuss from you. You can combat this by ignoring him when he is not eating (around meal time) and giving attention (calmly) only when he is eating. To ignore your dog successfully you will need to avoid eye contact or facing him, and refrain from talking to or touching him. Remember to ignore him from the moment he stops eating. Your dog should then soon associate eating with attention and start to





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enjoy his food once again. Small frequent feeds and activity feeding toys help to provide stimulation for the attention seeker. An increase in exercise can also help as this will mean your dog is more likely to be hungry.

Hints & Tips to Help Resolve the Problem

Below are some suggestions to help you:-

- 1) Choose a premium quality complete pet food that is palatable and digestible. Ensure that the diet is suitable for the age group and activity level of your pet and that the kibble size is appropriate. Arden Grange Prestige is ideal for the finicky eater because it is concentrated and therefore a smaller volume can be fed whilst still providing sufficient calories and nutrients. Does your current food suit your dog? Is he able to digest it sufficiently well? Some animals are intolerant to certain ingredients, and if this is the case, a dog may be reluctant to eat foods that contain them. Symptoms may include dry and itchy skin and / or loose motions.
- 2) Make sure all members of the family/household are aware of the problem and that they are willing to work with you. You may be trying very hard to resolve the appetite issues yourself, but if other people are sneaking in unscheduled meals or treats then it will undermine all you are trying to achieve.
- 3) It is often helpful to establish several smaller meal times throughout the day rather than one or two bigger meals. An inappetent dog is more likely to eat up most or all of a small meal than he is a large one. As with humans, a large meal if you are not feeling particularly hungry can be very off-putting, whereas a small plate may seem more acceptable. Also, you will need to train yourself to pick up any uneaten food within about 30 minutes of it being given to the dog. Some schools of thought suggest 15 minutes is sufficient, but not all dogs eat at the same rate. Some do like to eat a little, go off and do something else and then return to the bowl a little later. Knowing that the next meal is not too far away is reassuring, as you will naturally be worried that the dog will become hungry in a few hours if the food has not been eaten.
- 4) Limit the choice. Whilst dogs with normal digestions and a healthy appetite can eat a variety of foods with no problems, the more choice that you give during this crucial stage can cause a fussy eater to become even more finicky. It is hard, but a few days spent being strict (with yourself more than





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the dog!) will pay off very quickly. We often attribute human traits to our animals. The reality is that dogs have few taste buds compared to people and they don't tend to chew their food the same as we do as our dentition is very different. It is important to remember that if your dog is hungry – he will eat. If he is not eating, he may not be hungry, or he may be waiting until later in case something better comes along! Limiting choice and the time that food is available to the dog can be very helpful in combating this.

- 5) Don't give additional treats whilst you are resolving appetite problems. You will obviously want to reward good behaviour during training, and the best thing to do is to set back a small portion of the daily Arden Grange food allowance for this purpose. If this is refused, don't be tempted to offer food alternatives. Praise, petting and play are all very much appreciated as rewards by most dogs. Once feeding time becomes less of an issue then you can afford to be more flexible. Arden Grange make their own hypoallergenic dog treat ('Crunchy Bites') that are an ideal reward that can be fed without upsetting sensitive digestions.
- 6) If your dog has been used to one type of food for some period of time, don't suddenly expect him to take to a new food. Inappetance in this case is unlikely to be down to him 'not liking' the new food, it is more likely to be that he is wary of the unknown. A new diet should be introduced gradually over a period of several days. Ensure that the 2 products are mixed well to help to prevent the dog from differentiating between the kibbles. Soaking the food for 15 minutes beforehand may help in this case.
- 7) Are there other animals in the household that compete for your dog's food? If he has been threatened or attacked over food (even if this occurred some time in the past) it may make him nervous at mealtimes. Ensure that your dog is fed alone in a quiet part of the house or garden. Some dogs may respond well to gentle reassurance whilst eating or hand-feeding, but generally they tend to prefer to be left alone to eat. Some dogs on the other hand will be more inclined to eat if there is competition from other pets in the household. It does very much depend on the individual.
- 8) Some dogs are sensitive to noise, and metal tags banging against metal or crockery bowls can be very distracting to sensitive animals at mealtimes. Either remove the collar and tag before feeding or purchase a smaller tag that





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doesn't make a noise. Detergents can leave a residue in dog feeding bowls that can give a soapy taste to the food and be very off putting. Take extra care to rinse bowls well, especially if they have been in the dishwasher. Plastic bowls are particularly prone to retaining the residue of old food or soap.

Your dog may associate eating with an unpleasant experience such as a loud noise from a boiler or washing machine or the clatter of pots. If you suspect this may be the case, then remove the unnerving source from the area in which your dog eats, or relocate the feeding area.

Making Meal-Times Fun

Whilst it is sensible not to make too much of an issue over feeding (as dogs are extremely responsive to stress, and will quickly pick up on an owner's reactions) there is no reason why you can't make feeding time fun. Some tricks to try include hiding a small amount of soaked kibble or Arden Grange Partners canned food in a safe indestructible toy (e.g. a Kong – available from most large pet stores) and hiding food around the house and garden to encourage the dog to hunt down the food prior to eating.

Flexibility

Even though we do not tend to recommend feeding anything in addition to a fussy dog's regular diet, there are ways in which you can afford to be a little flexible with your dog during training: -

- ❑ Experiment with different textures of the food – some dogs like dry kibble, others prefer it soaked (try varying degrees of wetness) or some may even like a combination.
- ❑ Try soaking with warm water or heating the food in the microwave for a few seconds to bring out the aromas. Dogs rely heavily on their sense of smell when eating. The Lamb & Rice recipes have an especially appealing smell to dogs (and are available in a mini kibble size, which may be more acceptable to small breeds).

Arden Grange Partners

If you are continuing to have problems then the following may be helpful: Feed a reduced proportion of the product you have chosen as the main diet and add a small volume of Arden Grange Partners canned food. Like all of the Arden Grange recipes, this relies on wholesome, natural ingredients to whet the appetite, rather than the use





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of salts and sugars as appetite enhancers. It is vital that this is well-mixed in to prevent the dog from differentiating between the kibble and the wet food. The kibble should be soaked for this reason. Once the dog is readily eating this combination, the main diet can be increased and the fresh/canned food reduced until it is eventually phased out. Many owners prefer to continue to feed a combination of canned and kibble long-term. This is fine, but do be consistent and stick to one type of kibble and one type of canned food to avoid triggering the problem again, at least until the routine has been successful for several months.

Understanding Your Dog

If your dog has a routine of disruption at mealtimes which is "normal behaviour" for him, then in order to break this routine, it helps to be a bit sneaky! Try feeding him at completely random times and in different rooms; even outside if the weather's nice enough. If there is another person who can take over the feeding then this can be especially helpful. The current behaviour may be learned and reinforced by the familiarity of the routine, so little things to upset it can get things back on track fairly effectively in most cases.

If you have more than one dog in the household, there may be some un-rest in their relationship. You may notice changes at specific times; for example during adolescence or when a bitch is in season, pregnant or lactating. Males can become very frustrated and will often lose interest in food when the focus is on reproduction! There may also be some controlling behaviour exerted by a dog that is perceived to be of a higher ranking. To combat these behaviours it may be better to feed the dogs separately so that all can relax at meal times. If any of the dogs are particularly boisterous then it might be beneficial to increase the amount they exercise.

Environmental factors may also be of significance; for example moving home, a new baby or seasonal changes.

Summary

It is important to remember that every dog is an individual, but all dogs will respond to training regardless of their age or temperament. It may take longer to eradicate bad habits in some animals, particularly if these habits have been ingrained and reinforced over a long period of time.





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Caution

If you are experiencing behavioural difficulties with your dog, please consult your veterinary surgeon to rule out any possible clinical cause for the problem. A qualified pet behaviourist will also be able to give you constructive help in resolving any problems.

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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