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Destructive Behavior in Dogs – Chewing

Why do dogs chew?

Dogs, especially puppies, are extremely playful and investigative. While play with people and other dogs is an important part of socialization and social development, exploration and object play are important ways for dogs to learn about their environment. Therefore it is a normal behavior for puppies to investigate their environment by sniffing, tasting and perhaps chewing on objects throughout the home. Dogs that chew may also be scavenging for food (as in garbage raiding), playing (as in the dog that chews apart a book or couch), teething (dogs 3 to 6 months of age that chew on household objects), or satisfying a natural urge to chew and gnaw (which may serve to help keep teeth and gums healthy). Some dogs may chew because they receive attention (even if it is negative) or treats from the owners each time they chew, but by giving attention, the owners are inadvertently rewarding the behavior. Chewing and destructive behaviors may also be a response to anxiety. Dogs that are confined in areas where they are insecure may dig and chew in an attempt to escape. Dogs that are in a state of conflict, arousal or anxiety, such as separation anxiety, may turn to chewing and other forms of destructiveness as an outlet. (See our handout on 'Separation Anxiety in Dogs' for this specific problem).



How can chewing be treated?

First, determine why the dog is chewing. If the dog is a puppy or young adult dog that is chewing a variety of objects in the household, it is likely that play and investigation (and perhaps teething) are the motives.

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Dogs that raid garbage and steal food off counters are obviously motivated by the presence and odor of food. Dogs that chew at doorways or the doors of a cage may be attempting to escape confinement while others may be chewing as an outlet for anxiety. Determining the cause and motivation for chewing is essential in developing a treatment strategy. One of the best ways to determine why the dog is chewing and how the behavior might be resolved is to keep a diary of the pet's daily activities to determine when and where it is chewing, what occurred immediately prior to the behavior and what do family members do when they catch the dog chewing. In addition, the diary can help to determine whether the dog's daily schedule provides enough enrichment and a regular routine that serves all of the dog's needs. Although the goal of treatment is to stop undesirable chewing, the focus should be on providing sufficient enrichment and outlets and in rewarding desirable behavior. If the chewing occurs while you are gone, setting up a videotape may help determine if anxiety is the cause of the behavior.

Directing the chewing into appealing alternatives, providing sufficient play and exercise, and preventing inappropriate chewing are needed for the exploratory dog. You must also ensure that you are not inadvertently rewarding the behavior. Ignoring the dog, or using a device to interrupt the chewing may be useful for these dogs. With puppies, this behavior may decrease in time, provided you provide enough daily play and exercise and you direct the chewing to proper outlets (see handout on 'Training Dogs – Enrichment, Predictability and Scheduling'). Dogs that are garbage raiding or food stealing need to be treated by supervision, prevention (by keeping food inaccessible) and booby-traps, since the behavior itself is self-rewarding. Dogs that are destructive when trying to escape from confinement must learn to become comfortable and secure in the cage or room where they are to be confined (see our handout on 'Crate Training in Dogs'). In some cases, a new confinement area may have to be chosen. Dogs that are destructive due to anxiety will need to have the cause of the anxiety diagnosed, and the problem appropriately treated. (See our handout on 'Separation Anxiety in Dogs').

How can proper chewing be encouraged?

Before considering how to discourage inappropriate chewing, you need to provide some appropriate outlets for your dog's "needs," not only the chewing but also all of its requirements for physical exercise, social and object play and exploration.

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To get your dog's chewing headed in the right direction, begin with a few toys having a variety of tastes, odors, and textures to determine what appeals most to the pet (see handout on 'Behavior Management Products'). Although plastic, nylon or rubber toys may be the most durable, products that can be torn apart such as rawhide or pig's ears may be more like the natural prey and wood products that attract most dogs. Coating or stuffing toys with liver or cheese spread, peanut butter, or bits of food may also increase their desirability. There are numerous durable rubber toys that are designed to be stuffed or filled with food or treats, which your dog will then need to chew or manipulate to obtain its "rewards". There are even flavored products that have been designed to stuff into the toys. Placing soup, meat products or canned dog food into the toys and freezing them can make them retain their interest and last a lot longer. In fact, if you are looking for ways to keep your dog occupied and amused when you cannot play or supervise, then it might be useful to provide some or all of your dogs meals inside these feeding toys, so your dog can work (and play) for its food (See 'Behavior Modification – Working for Food – Dogs and Cats').

Another option that might help reduce your dog's undesirable chewing, as well as helping maintain healthy teeth and gums, is to provide toys, food and treats that are designed to promote good dental hygiene. Although some dental foods and treats contain ingredients that help to reduce tartar; the ones that are likely to be the most beneficial to the dog with a need to chew are the ones that have a texture, consistency and size that encourages chewing and gnawing. Food and treats that are soft, small enough to be swallowed whole, or break apart with little or no chewing, are less likely to satisfy the chewing need.

To ensure that your puppy is encouraged and rewarded for chewing on its own toys, and discouraged from chewing on all other objects, it must be supervised at all times. Whenever supervision is not possible, you should prevent access to any object or area that might be chewed, other than the pet's toys.

How else can my dog's chewing activity be reduced?



In addition to providing ample opportunity to explore and play, you should insure that your pet has a regular (predictable) daily routine that provides social activity times, where the pet gets play, training and exercise and an opportunity to eliminate. For many dogs a daily walk can be very calming and provide exercise and activity. In between these social times, especially if the owner cannot supervise the pet will need to be placed in its bed, crate or room for a nap, or placed in a room or confinement area where it has appealing feeding, play or chew toys.

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Many of the breeds obtained as family pets have been bred for a variety of working tasks. This means that they are mentally and physically capable and "programmed for" activities such as retrieving, herding, hunting or sledding. Therefore the requirements of these breeds should be met by providing either work or an equivalent amount and type of play. Games such as tug-of-war, retrieving, catching a ball or Frisbee, jogging, pulling a cart, flyball, or even long walks are excellent alternatives for expending energy, while socially interacting with family members. However, the type and amount of play may vary with the breed, age and health of the pet. Obedience training, agility classes and training your dog to a few simple commands and tricks are not only pleasant interactive activities for you and your dog, but they also provide some stimulation and "work" in the dog's daily schedule.

How can I stop the chewing on household objects?

Access to all areas that the dog might chew must be prevented unless the owner is present to supervise, or the area is effectively booby-trapped.

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Your dog can only be punished for chewing if it is caught in the act. Even then, punishment must be humane, immediate and effective. Punishment administered directly by the owner can lead to fear and defensive reactions in some dogs, and may serve as a form of attention and reinforcement to others (see handout on 'Behavior Modification – Using Punishment Effectively'). A shake can, alarm (audible or ultrasonic), or even verbal reprimand is preferable to techniques that use physical contact of any type. A hand reaching for your dog should always mean affection or treats; a hand reaching to punish can have the opposite effect. Punishment of any type, when the owner is in direct sight, can deter the pet in your presence, but the pet will quickly learn that the behavior is not punished in your absence. Therefore, remote punishment (where the owner is out of sight while administering punishment) may teach the dog that the behavior itself is inappropriate. A head halter and long remote leash that is pulled each time the dog chews (see our handout on 'Training Dogs – Head Halter Training'), a water rifle, remote citronella collar or one of the audible or ultrasonic alarms may be effective. However, none of these products are practical when the owner is absent or cannot supervise. Arriving home and punishing a pet for an act that is already completed will only serve to increase the pet's anxiety.

The only way that chewing might be deterred when your dog cannot be supervised is by booby-trapping the areas where the dog might chew. To be successful the punishment must be noxious enough to immediately deter the pet. Taste or odor aversion is often the simplest and most practical type of booby trap but many pets will have to be conditioned in advance to detest the smell or taste by squirting anti-chew spray (e.g. bitter apple, Ropel[®]) into the pet's mouth or across its nose. A

small amount of cayenne pepper mixed with water, oil of citronella or commercial anti-chew sprays may also be successful as deterrents. Alternatively, the spray could be placed on any object that the dog might chew and a fishing line can be attached from the object to a stack of empty cans on a nearby table or counter. At the instant chewing begins, the stack will come crashing down. Most dogs are then conditioned after a few events to avoid that particular taste or odor for fear of another "can attack". An alarm mat, motion detector alarms, indoor citronella avoidance units and a motion detector spray can are a few other examples of environmental punishment (See our handouts on 'Behavior Management Products' and 'Behavior Modification – Using Punishment Effectively').

What if the dog continues to chew household objects?

Whenever you cannot supervise or monitor your dog's behavior, he or she should be confined to a cage or a dog-proof room, with any potential chewing sites effectively booby-trapped. If chewing is continuing, the underlying motivation may not have been accurately determined and the reasons for chewing should be revisited.

Additional Help

There are many options available for more help with your dog. One of the very best in our area is **Smart Dog University**. Check out their website at SmartDogUniversity.com for helpful newsletters, classes, and other cool dog info.

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