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Destructive Behavior in Dogs – Digging

Why do dogs dig?

Digging behavior in dogs can have many motivations. Some breeds, such as the Northern breeds (Huskies, Malamutes) dig cooling holes and lie in them. On a very hot summer day any dog may dig a hole to cool off. Breeds such as the terriers have been bred to flush out prey or dig for rodents. With their ability to hear high frequency sounds, and their highly acute sense of smell, some dogs dig as a direct result of odors or sounds such as those from voles and moles that attract the pet from beneath the ground. Pregnant bitches dig when nesting. Dogs dig to bury or retrieve bones. Dogs also dig to escape from confinement or due to separation anxiety. Digging may also be an activity similar to destructive chewing that occurs when pets are left alone with insufficient stimulation or attention. This is particularly so in puppies and in highly energetic dogs. For details on treating these problems, see our handouts on 'Destructive Behavior in Dogs - Chewing' and 'Separation Anxiety in Dogs'.



How can I determine why my dog is digging?

The first step in treating inappropriate digging behavior is to determine the reason for digging. Prevention, remote punishment, and booby-traps may also be needed, but reducing your dog's motivation to dig, and providing for all of its needs are essential so that digging is not merely redirected to a new location. Inhibiting or preventing all digging, without understanding and dealing with the dog's motivation could result in new behavior problems such as chewing, excessive vocalization, or escape behaviors.

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For example, dogs that dig because they are pursuing prey will continue unless you can get rid of the prey. Dogs that dig in an attempt to get cool should be provided with a cool resting area with plenty of shade and water. On very hot days, it may be best to bring your dog inside. Dogs that are digging to bury or to uncover previously buried objects could be provided with an area where this type of digging is acceptable.

One of the most common reasons for digging is as a form of play and exploration. Additional play, training and exercise sessions may be needed to keep digging behaviors under control, especially if your dog is young and very active. Dogs that continue to dig may require additional stimulation to keep them occupied when the owners are not around. Insuring that your dog has a regular and sufficiently enriching daily routine can go a long way to preventing problems such as digging (see our handouts on 'Training Dogs - Enrichment, Predictability and Scheduling'). Whenever your pet is left outdoors unsupervised, it should be at a time when it has had sufficient social interaction and exercise, and some reward based

training. Providing a variety of toys for object play can help give the pet some constructive activities in which to participate while outdoors. In fact, leaving the dog alone unattended can be an excellent time to leave food manipulation toys, so that the dog can occupy its time working for food rather than digging (see 'Behavior Modification – Working for Food – Dogs and Cats'). In addition, daily walks around the neighborhood provide exercise and stimulation that can be very satisfying for many dogs.

Treatment for this type of digging is similar to those recommended in our puppy handout on 'Destructive Behavior in Dogs – Chewing'. If your dog is outside all day and digging is taking place, you do need to ask yourself if keeping the dog inside may be a better answer. This is particularly true for the dog that digs to escape from the yard or confinement area. If you are unable to keep the dog inside because of house-soiling, destruction, or separation anxiety then you may need to address those problems first. See our handouts on these topics as needed.

How can I stop inappropriate digging?



a) Provide an allowable digging area

For some dogs it may be useful for you to create an area where the dog is allowed to dig. This could be a spot in the backyard where you have placed soft, loose dirt; perhaps you can use railroad ties to delineate the location. Next, make this place somewhere that your dog would like to dig. Bury things there that your pet would like to dig up. You might need to start with food that is only lightly covered. Then put things deeper into the ground. If you do this (when your dog is not watching!) at irregular intervals, your dog should be more likely to dig there than other locations in your yard. Another option is to allow the dog to dig in a spot where it has already chosen, and to prevent digging in other locations by supervision, confinement (prevention), or booby-traps.

b) Supervision and punishment

Supervision and direct intervention (shaker can, verbal reprimand, water sprayer) can be used to prevent inappropriate digging in the owner's presence, but will not stop the behavior in the owner's absence. Remote punishment (turning on a hose or sprinkler, pulling on a long leash, using remote citronella collar), booby-traps (placing chicken wire, rocks or water where the pet digs), or covering the surface with one that is impervious (asphalt/patio stones) might teach the pet to avoid the digging site even in the owner's absence. These techniques do not however prevent the pet from digging in other locations. For more information on these techniques and possible complications see our handouts on 'Behavior Modification – Using Punishment Effectively' and 'Behavior Modification – Why Punishment Should be Avoided'.

What else can be done if inappropriate digging continues when I am not around to supervise?

"When you are unavailable to supervise your dog, housing the dog indoors is the most practical solution until he or she has learned to stay outdoors without digging."

When you are unavailable to supervise your dog, housing the dog indoors is the most practical solution until he or she has learned to stay outdoors without digging. If you would like to continue to leave it outdoors, it is best to confine the dog to an area such as a pen or run, so that it has no access to the digging areas. The run should be inescapable, and could be covered with gravel, patio tiles or have an asphalt or concrete floor so that it cannot escape or do damage. Of course it will

be necessary to provide sufficient exercise and stimulation before confining the dog and an adequate number of treats and play toys in the run to keep the dog occupied. Another alternative is to provide an area within the pen or run where digging is allowed.

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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