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Tail Chasing

Compulsive Disorders in Dogs

What are the more common compulsive disorders in dogs?

In dogs, compulsive behaviors include acral lick dermatitis, flank sucking, pacing, circling, incessant or rhythmic barking, fly snapping or chasing unseen objects, freezing and staring, polydipsia (excessive drinking), sucking, licking, or chewing on objects (or owners), tonguing or licking the air and other forms of self mutilation.

"There may be a genetic predisposition to compulsive behaviors."

There may be a genetic predisposition to compulsive behaviors. For example, flank sucking is most commonly seen in Doberman pinschers, spinning in bull terriers, fly chasing in miniature schnauzers, and acral lick dermatitis in many medium to large breed dogs. The diagnosis begins by ruling out or treating possible underlying medical causes. Since a variety of medical problems including painful conditions, neurologic diseases and dermatologic disorders can cause many of these signs, an extensive diagnostic workup may be needed to rule out underlying medical problems. In some cases, trying a pet on a medication such as a seizure control medication or a medication to control pain or itchiness may be part of the diagnostic process. If the problem is diagnosed as a compulsive disorder, drugs that inhibit the reuptake or serotonin may be effective at reducing or controlling some of the signs but concurrent behavior therapy and environmental modifications are also likely to be needed. Common treatments are briefly listed here, and include a) providing a predictable daily routine (see handout on 'Training Dogs - Enrichment, Predictability and Scheduling') b) providing a reward based training approach that shapes desirable responses and avoids the use of punishment (see handouts on 'Behavior Modification - Reinforcement and Rewards' and 'Behavior Modification - Why Punishment Should be Avoided') c) avoiding the use of rewards except when desirable behaviors are exhibited so that the pet learns what behaviors predictably earn rewards d) providing a few regularly scheduled social interaction sessions (including social play, exercise and training) e) between social interaction sessions, providing a settle down area for rest and relaxation that contains stimulating objects and toys that use food and textures to maintain interest (see handouts on 'Training Dogs - Settle and Relaxation Training' and 'Behavior Modification - Working for Food - Dogs and Cats'). The diagnosis and treatment of compulsive disorders are discussed in detail in our handout Canine and Feline Compulsive Disorders and Displacement behaviors.

What is tail chasing or spinning in dogs?

Compulsive tail chasing may be a displacement or compulsive disorder in some dogs, but could also be a type of seizure disorder, or might be due to pain or medical illness. Some cases such as those seen in bull terriers may exhibit a more intense spinning or whirling behavior. Other concurrent behavior problems such as aggression have been reported in "spinning" bull terriers. In some cases, the problem may have started as play or displacement behavior that was subsequently rewarded by the owner. It is sometimes seen in active herding breeds of dogs that lack appropriate outlets for exercise and activity. Once underlying medical problems are treated and seizure disorders and painful diseases of the tail or perianal area (area surrounding the anus) are treated or ruled out, behavior and drug therapy is much the same as for other

compulsive disorders. Head halters are very useful in dogs that chase their tails or spin to interrupt and redirect the dog to a more appropriate response. Once the dog has focused on the owner, they can be told to sit and then settle and over time the desire to tail chase or spin may diminish. Regular interactions, exercise and routine are very useful in the treatment of tail chasing in most dogs.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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