

DESTRUCTIVENESS – 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 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’) 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 at a variety of objects in the household, it is likely that play and investigation (and perhaps teething) is the motive. Dogs that raid garbage and steal food off counters are obviously motivated by the presence and odor of food. Some dogs are attempting to escape confinement while in others chewing may be an outlet for anxiety. Determining the cause and motivation for chewing is therefore essential in developing a treatment strategy. Directing the chewing into appealing alternatives, sufficient play and exercise, and prevention of inappropriate chewing are needed for the exploratory dog. You must ensure that you are not inadvertently rewarding the behavior. Inattention or disruption devices may be useful for these dogs. If the dog is a puppy this behavior may decrease in time, provided you direct the chewing to proper outlets. Dogs that are garbage raiding or food stealing need to be treated by supervision, prevention and booby-traps, since the behavior itself is self-rewarding. Dogs that are destructive to escape confinement must learn to become comfortable and secure with the cage or room where they are to be confined. Alternatively a new confinement area may have to be chosen. Dogs that are destructive as an outlet for anxiety, will need to have the cause of the anxiety diagnosed, and the problem appropriately treated. (See our handout on ‘Separation anxiety’).

How can proper chewing be encouraged?

Before considering how inappropriate chewing might be discouraged the real key is to provide some appropriate outlets for your dog's chewing "needs." Begin with a few toys with a variety of tastes, odors, and textures to determine what appeals most to the pet. Although plastic, nylon or rubber toys may be the most durable, products that can be torn apart such as rawhide or pigs ears may be more like the natural prey and wood products that attract most dogs. Coating toys with liver or cheese spread or peanut butter may also increase their desirability. The Kong™ is a durable chew toy, but its appeal can be greatly enhanced by placing a piece of cheese or liver inside and then filling it tight with biscuits. Placing soup items or food into the Kong and freezing it, or freezing food items in "Popsicle" makers and placing them in the dogs food bowl may provide a little longer durability to the treats. Since the development of the Kong there are now a wide variety of durable toys that can have food stuffed or frozen inside or placed into small grooves in the toy, so that the dog needs to "work" to get its reward (see our handout on 'Behavior management products'). Another group of dog toys have compartments that can be filled with food. The dog needs to manipulate the toy by rolling, chewing or shaking to get the food treats to fall out. To ensure that your puppy is encouraged and rewarded for chewing on its toys, and discouraged from chewing on all other objects, it must be supervised at all times. Whenever supervision is not possible, you must prevent access to any object or area that might be chewed. Although play periods and chew toys may be sufficient for most pets, additional activities such as self-feeders, other pets, interactive toys, and even videos may help to keep pets occupied.

How else can my dog's activity be reduced?

The needs of most working dogs are usually satisfied with daily work sessions (retrieving, herding, sledding, etc), while non-working house-pets will require alternative forms of activity to meet their requirements for work and play. Games such as tug-of-war, retrieving, catching a ball or Frisbee, jogging, or even long walks are often an acceptable alternative to work, allow the dog an opportunity to expend unused energy, and provide regular attention periods. Obedience training, agility classes and simply teaching your dog a few tricks are not only pleasant interactive activities for you and your dog, but they also provide some stimulation and "work" to 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. Your dog can only be punished for chewing if it is caught in the act. Even then, punishment must be humane, immediate and effective. A shake can, verbal reprimand, or alarm (audible or ultrasonic) can deter the pet in your presence, but the behavior will continue in your absence. Remote punishment (where the owner is out of sight while administering punishment) may teach the dog that the behavior itself is inappropriate (see our handout on 'Canine punishment'). A head halter and long remote leash pulled each time the dog chews, 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 to booby-trap 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 (eg. 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 the particular taste or odor for fear of another "can attack". A shock or alarm mat, mousetrap trainers, indoor invisible fencing (citronella spray or "shock"), or motion detectors are a few other examples of environmental punishment (see our handouts on 'Behavior management products' and 'Canine punishment').

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 dog-proof room with any potential chewing sites effectively booby-trapped. Alternatively, a basket type muzzle can be used for short departures.