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DESTRUCTIVENESS – 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 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. 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.

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.

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.

One of the most common reasons for digging is as a form of play, activity 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. Treatment for this type of digging can be found in our puppy handout on 'Destructiveness – 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.

How can I stop inappropriate digging?

a) Provide a 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 dirt and perhaps railroad ties around the area to delineate the location. Next, make this place somewhere that your dog would like to dig in. Bury things there that your pet would like to dig up. This might be food, lightly covered. Then put things deeper into the ground. If you do that (naturally 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, and water rifle) can be used to prevent inappropriate digging in the owner's presence but the behavior will likely continue in the owner's absence. Remote punishment (turning on a sprinkler, pulling on an extended leash, a remote collar), booby-traps (placing chicken wire, rocks or water in the area 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.

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. 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.