

Dog: Repetitive Behavior



What It Is

Repetitive behavior— or the clinical name “stereotypic behavior”—is a normal behavior performed in a repetitive and compulsive manner. We don’t know if dogs obsess the way humans do, so we can’t call these behaviors obsessive compulsive. We do know, however, that they can and do interfere with a normal and happy life—for you and your dog.

Common repetitive behaviors:

- Licking
- Shadow or light chasing
- Tail chasing/whirling
- Flank sucking
- Fly snapping
- Pacing

What to Do

If you suspect your dog suffers from a repetitive behavior disorder, the first thing to do is rule out any other medical or behavioral problem. For example, some dogs that appear to be fly snapping for no apparent reason turn out to have eye lesions, and a dog behaving strangely might have had a seizure. For these reasons, a thorough medical checkup is your first item of business.

If your veterinarian diagnoses a repetitive/compulsive behavior pattern in your dog, the best way forward is to see a veterinary behavior specialist for treatment. Treatment involves minimizing stress, a behavior modification plan, and sometimes medication.

Whatever you do, don’t interfere with your dog when he engages in the behavior, especially not if aggression is involved. If your dog is causing injury to himself with his behavior, avoid any stress factors or possible triggers and seek help from a qualified professional as soon as possible.

THE MOST COMMON PROBLEMS

Licking (Acral Lick Dermatitis)

Dogs that suffer from this condition have licked themselves so much they develop an ulcerative skin lesion. The trouble spot is usually on their carpus (wrist) or metacarpus (the area below the wrist and above the foot), but can also be other places, such as the base of the tail. Often, these dogs lick compulsively to the point of inflicting deep infections. If you suspect your dog suffers from ALD, see your vet or a veterinary behavior specialist right away. Treatment includes a full medical, dermatological and orthopedic workup, a behavior modification plan and, unless the triggers can be identified and removed, psychotropic medication.

Flank Sucking

Flank sucking is mainly seen in Doberman Pinschers. It involves the dog curling his head around to his flank and literally sucking the skin. The disorder rarely progresses to self-mutilation, but the skin can get sore and irritated. Treatment includes a full medical workup, a behavior modification plan and, unless the triggers can be identified and removed, psychotropic medication.

Dog: Repetitive Behavior *(continued)*

Fly Snapping

Dogs with this disorder seem to have hallucinations: they chase flying items only they can see. Here, we have to consider many underlying medical and behavioral reasons. Attention seeking, ocular disease, seizures, metabolic or toxic or neoplastic diseases all need to be ruled out. Often, mental stimulation and exercise or a calming cap can help.

If you suspect your dog suffers from this disorder, seek help from a veterinary behavior specialist. Meanwhile, never punish the behavior or give your dog attention for it. Instead, try to redirect your dog to a healthier behavior such as playing with a toy or fetching a ball. Use a food-dispensing toy for all meals and reward your dog often for calm and relaxed behavior.

Eating Non-Food Items (Pica)

Pica is a disorder in which your dog eats items other than food. This is not, however, about a puppy getting into your socks or a Labrador eating cardboard that smells like pizza. This is a dog that consistently eats inedible objects—anything from mittens to rocks and plastic bags. The behavior is likely to be compulsive if you can't easily redirect your dog to a more appropriate snack or chew toy. Often, these dogs have abdominal surgery already at a young age to remove an ingested item.

For compulsive pica, your first course of action is to make sure your dog has enough physical, mental, and social stimulation. Next, you have to manage your dog's environment diligently. Some dogs need to wear a basket muzzle to stop them from eating unsafe things. Visit your vet as soon as possible, so she can conduct a gastrointestinal examination and rule out possible underlying medical problems such as parasites, allergies, nutritional deficiencies, and other organ disorders. Possible behavior problems at root include anxiety, environmental deprivation, and abnormal play and exploration behavior.

Tail Chasing (Whirling)

Dogs with this disorder spin in circles, apparently to chase their own tail. Breeds prone to the disorder include the English bull terrier, Staffordshire bull terrier, German shepherd, and Australian cattle dog. This suggests genetic factors may play a role, but first medical reasons such as back, neurologic, or dermatologic problems must be ruled out. The next step would be to examine behavioral causes like anxiety, environmental deprivation, and abnormal play behavior.

Never punish or give your dog attention for tail chasing—if you inadvertently reward the behavior (even with negative attention), it may get worse. Instead redirect your dog to an alternative behavior such as sitting or lying down or redirecting to playing with a toy or fetching a ball. A calming cap may also help. Use a food-dispensing toy for all meals and reward your dog often for calm and relaxed behavior.