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Chewing and how to control it

Adolescent chewing (or exploratory chewing as it is also known) commonly occurs in dogs between puppyhood and adulthood at seven to 12 months of age, and can last for up to six months. It is different from puppy teething since it happens after all the needle-like puppy teeth have fallen out. Adolescent dogs often have an uncontrollable urge to chew, which could be because of discomfort in the gums as their adult teeth are settling into the jawbone or as they attempt to explore their environment and discover new things.

Why do dogs chew?

Reasons include the following:

- Boredom – dogs left alone for long periods or not getting enough mental and physical stimulation are likely to become bored. Working breeds have naturally high activity levels and become easily bored in the wrong home. This can lead to destructive behaviour.
- Puppy teething – this occurs between three and seven months of age when puppies have an uncontrollable urge to chew to relieve some of the discomfort in their gums. Chewing also facilitates the removal of puppy teeth and the eruption of the adult set.
- Attention seeking – if your dog learns that chewing something forbidden (such as the TV remote) makes you get up and chase round the room, the animal quickly learns that this is a great way to get attention.
- An unbalanced diet – for example, if not getting enough calcium your dog may try to compensate by chewing stones or plaster. All dogs should be fed according to their age, weight, health status and the amount of exercise they receive. We can advise on and supply the best diet for your dog.
- Distress at being left alone – some dogs cannot cope with being separated from their owners and are destructive when left.

What can be done about chewing?

Supply your dog with items that are safe and tough enough to survive being chewed – this means they should not splinter, or break into small or harmful pieces that can be swallowed. Make sure the dog does not have access to places where there are valuable or dangerous items if you are not there to supervise. Regularly exercise your dog – especially away from home, at least once a day (ie do not just exercise your dog in the garden). Visit different environments when you walk your dog (such as pavements, fields, woods, parks and beaches). Care must be



taken with puppies until they are fully protected by vaccination. Teach your dog what is acceptable and unacceptable to chew. Try to play with your dog at least three times a day, for at least five minutes each time. Short, frequent play sessions are the best.

Toys and chews are different. Toys are usually designed to be thrown, chased, squeaked, and tugged during play. Most are not designed to be chewed. Some exceptions are Kongs and activity balls which can be referred to as “chew toys”. Easily destroyed soft toys should always be picked up by the owner at the end of the game and put out of the dog’s reach. This will save you money because the toys last much longer – you will also avoid the need to bring your dog in because of a blockage caused by swallowing toys. Do not leave them for your dog to chew once the game has finished. Chews should be given when a dog is settling down for a quiet time, either in your presence or alone. Unlike toys, chews are designed for nibbling and gnawing and are essential if you want a dog to chew acceptable items instead of your furniture. Examples of chews include rasks, chew sticks, dental rawhide, pressed hide, large and medium Kongs, and activity balls.

What’s so good about kongs?

All dogs like to play on their own sometimes, so it is important to leave at least one “safe” toy down for them to play with at any time. An excellent choice for this purpose is a chew toy such as a Kong (available from pet shops). This is a firm rubber toy, hollow on the inside and which can withstand lots of chewing. If you stuff biscuits inside the Kong or smear some cheese spread inside, your dog will work to get the food out, and will nibble, lick and chew on the toy for some time. Kongs are also good at stimulating play and chase behaviour, since they bounce unpredictably.

And activity balls?

These are hollow dimpled balls, the size of a small football, with two holes. If you place small pieces of dry food inside (such as a portion of the dog’s daily food ration or mixer), the dog has to roll the ball around to get the food to drop out of the holes. This keeps them occupied for quite some time.

Teaching right from wrong.

Always reward your dog for chewing the right things. Every day, provide one or two chews or chew toys your dog has not seen for a while. Leave them out on the floor whenever your dog is in the room. When you see your dog chew one, praise gently.

Correct your dog when he chews the wrong things. If you notice your dog is about to chew something prohibited, quietly direct attention onto an acceptable chew, and make a huge fuss when the dog begins to chew on it. This will encourage your dog to select the items you want to be chewed.

Other tips...

Any valuable possessions (such as wallets) or potentially dangerous items (such as scissors) should be removed from your dog’s reach. Your dog may chew your best shoes or the remote control if these are within reach and adolescent chewing can sometimes be discouraged by spraying the object with a taste deterrent such as Bitter Apple (available from pet shops). However, this method only discourages some dogs. In addition, in order to maintain the unpleasant taste the object needs to be frequently re-sprayed. Spraying items with a repellent spray does not cure a chewing problem. You will still need to follow the rest of the advice in this leaflet to improve your dog’s behaviour.

Common problems

I always chastise my dog for chewing, but he still does it... This is because punishment alone does not work. At best, it just teaches the dog not to chew when you are there, as your dog knows you will get annoyed. It does not teach the dog the right thing to do. Therefore, it follows that when you are out, rugs may get chewed and the table leg eaten. You are not there to say “no”.

My dog already has a chew and lots of toys, so why does he still chew things he shouldn't? The dog is bored with the chew, perhaps because it is available all the time. Toys are not as much fun unless the owner is playing too, but usually when your dog picks up a toy or a bone this is ignored by you. Conversely, if your dog chews the table leg, you pay attention immediately – so your dog finds it more fun to chew the table leg. You need to teach your dog to distinguish between what is right and wrong to chew.

When should I give my dog chews? The chew or bone should be given whenever you want your dog to settle down. This could be when you want to go out and leave the dog alone for a while, or it may be when you want to relax.

My dog chews my things out of spite. Chewing is done for reasons such as discomfort in the gums, boredom due to lack of exercise, or distress in the owner's absence. Chewing is never done out of spite or jealousy, or with any intent to destroy valuable property on purpose.

Do I have to buy dozens of expensive chews? No, but ideally you should have a wide range of chews, in order that you can rotate the ones you give on a daily basis.

What makes chewing worse?

- If you take everything away from the dog, and leave nothing appropriate to chew, your dog will find something else (such as your carpet);
- Lack of physical and mental stimulation (ie inadequate exercise and play sessions);
- Keeping your dog in one place (never taking your dog out of the house and garden).

Mistakes may happen. Never give your dog the run of the house until reliable behaviour is established. If your dog chews whilst you have been out, do not punish when you return. It will do no good. It can come as a great shock, when the dog runs to greet you, if you are annoyed or even aggressive. Punishment only makes the dog think you are unpredictable and causes mistrust and anxiety – and an anxious dog is much more likely to chew.

Beyond adolescence and into adulthood

When your dog becomes a fully grown adult, the desire to chew will diminish, but will not go completely. It is important to give adult dog chews throughout life to exercise jaws and keep teeth clean. Always remember the chewing stage will pass more quickly if you understand your dog's needs. If you provide a range of chews, plenty of play sessions and the opportunity to explore different environments and exercise well, you are well on the way to having a contented dog that only chews the right things.

