

Why Does My Dog Dig?

Digging is a very common thing that dogs do, you are not alone! There are many reasons why your dog may dig, ranging from natural tendencies and instincts to underlying behavioral issues. The purpose of this handout is to inform you of the many reasons why dogs dig and to help you to identify the reason that your dog may dig. With this information you can begin to work out a plan with the help of your veterinarian.

Hunting behavior – digging along rodent tracks/mole holes, excitement, whining, barking, tail wagging, and being fixated on the ground.

- **DO** – Get rid of the rodents with dog safe pest control. Contact a local exterminator for safe products and methods to use around dogs. Implement only supervised outdoor time in the yard.
- **DON'T** – Use pesticides/rat traps that may be harmful to your pet OR restrict access or place the traps in dog-free areas. Keep your pet inside if you have to use toxic chemicals.

Seeking cool spot (seasonal) – Dog lays in hole, and has preferred areas in/near shade. Especially in dogs with a lower tolerance for heat.

- **DO** – Provide shady landscaping, kiddie pool, a kennel/dog house, shorter hair cut, automatic sprinklers, dog door, and always adequate fresh water.

Likes to Dig – happy digging, random holes all over – no specific distribution near fences/shade/mole holes, may dig when you are home, deep holes, not seasonal.

- **DO** – Build your dog a sandbox, or train to dig in a designated area of the yard that has distinct, diggable substrate (sand). Bury toys/treats/balls in sand area and train with positive reinforcement and treats to dig in the now designated appropriate place. Consider fencing around flower beds/landscaping.
- **DON'T** – physically punish dogs for digging.

Boredom – (similar to “likes to dig”) – only digs when alone, alone for long periods, attention seeking, may be an only dog, may see other destructive behavior – chewing furniture, etc, may bark incessantly.

- **DO** – Exercise the dog more, consider getting another dog, doggy daycare, provide toys, enrichment – bowling balls, see above for more enrichment ideas/training.

Burying objects– dog buries food/bones/toys and retrieves them at a later time, or not at all. They may be protective of resources with other dogs around. They may retrieve treats when it is “safe.” ie, there are no other dogs around. Holes may not be obvious because they are covered, or they may be small.

- **DO** – Give them treats/toys inside the house only, and perhaps only give them treats/toys when they are away from other dogs. Provide them with outdoor-only toys.

Escaping – May be a seasonal issue if your dog is intact. They may bark and run along the fence line, growl/lunge at fence towards neighbor dogs, escape out open gates, wait to bolt at gates when people come in/out. Dog aggression may be underlying this behavior. *It is best to consult your veterinarian for this problem.*

- **DO** – Look for potential reasons that your dog may be escaping. Some suggestions for things to implement are to: exercise your dog more, provide enrichment, play with dog in the back yard, provide a clean environment, scoop the poop regularly, set-up doggy play dates or doggy day care. Build a false fence to increase distance between neighbor dogs. If severe, reinforce fence into the ground with cement/lay chicken wire, install motion detection sprinklers to keep them away from fence and remove direct contact with neighbor dogs or nearby sidewalks. Consider neutering intact males
- **DON'T** – To avoid injury, do not chain up your dog.

Anxiety – Anxiety happens when you are away – your dog is anxious when left alone/or you are getting ready to leave, they may exhibit whining, pacing, and be very excited when you get home. You may find destruction around windows/doors, general destructive behavior, and other unwanted behaviors. *It is best to consult your veterinarian for this problem.*

- **DO** – determine underlying cause of anxiety with your veterinarian.
- **DON'T** – punish your dog for digging.

In conclusion, there are many reasons why your dog may dig and there are many ways you can work with your dog to stop the behavior. This list is designed to give you a few simple guidelines and suggestions that may help. Please consult your veterinarian when implementing any plans, if you have any concerns, or if any problems arise. Remember, safety first!

*Handout created as part of a class exercise by veterinary students:
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Clinical Animal Behavior Service
www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vmth/small_animal/behavior