

## CHEWING - DESTRUCTIVENESS

### Why do dogs chew?

Dogs, especially puppies are extremely playful and investigative. While play with people and other dogs is an important part of socialisation and social development, exploration and object play are important ways for dogs to learn about their environment. Therefore it is a normal behaviour for puppies to investigate their environment by sniffing, tasting and chewing on objects throughout the home.

Dogs that chew may also be scavenging for food (*garbage raiding*), playing (*chewing apart a book or couch*), teething (*dogs 3 to 6 months of age that chew often chew on household objects*), or satisfying a natural urge to chew and gnaw (*which may serve to help keep teeth and gums healthy*). Chewing is also a self-soothing behaviour as it releases endorphins which help to relax and calm a dog.



Some dogs may chew because they receive attention (*even if it is negative*) or treats from the owners each time they chew, and the owners are inadvertently rewarding the behaviour. Chewing and destructive behaviours 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.

### How can chewing be treated?

First, it is important to determine why your dog is chewing. Determining the cause and motivation for chewing is 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 behaviour. If your dog is a puppy this behaviour may decrease in time, provided you direct the chewing to appropriate outlets.

Dogs that are garbage raiding or food stealing need to be treated by supervision and prevention, since the behaviour itself is self-rewarding. Dogs that are destructive to escape confinement must learn to become comfortable and secure with the crate, yard or room where they are to be confined. Alternatively a new confinement area may have to be chosen. Refer to our 'denning' info sheet to ensure any new area is introduced in a positive manner. Dogs that are destructive as an outlet for anxiety will need to have the cause of the anxiety diagnosed, and the problem appropriately treated.

### **How can appropriate 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, odours, and textures to determine what appeals most to your pet.

Although plastic, nylon or rubber toys may be the most durable, products that can be torn apart such as rawhide, pig and cow ears, dried tendons and bully sticks may be more like the natural prey that attract most dogs. Coating toys with liver or cheese spread or peanut butter may also increase their desirability.

Numerous other play toys are also available that provide a means for stuffing food or treats inside, so that the dog has to "work" to get its reward. To ensure that your puppy is encouraged and rewarded for chewing on his/her toys, and discouraged from chewing on all other objects, he/she 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, interactive toys, and even music/TV may help to keep pets occupied.

### **How can I stop my dog chewing on household objects?**

Firstly manage the situation by preventing access to all areas that your dog might chew unless you are there to supervise. Do not let your dog practice destructive behaviour. You can achieve this by setting up a confinement area such as a crate and/or exercise pen.



Refer to our 'Denning' and 'Crate Training' info sheets for more detail.

Ask yourself what you would prefer your dog to be doing instead of chewing (i.e. playing with toys, laying quietly). Teach your dog to do this behaviour instead. Give your dog lots of appropriate toys that can be chewed, and make them highly rewarding. Praise him/her for playing with the appropriate toys.

Teach your dog to enjoy toys when you are absent by stepping out of the room briefly after giving him/her a toy, and returning and praising him/her.

Gradually increase the amount of time you are absent from the room. If your dog begins to stress, bark or chew, you've left it too long. Go back, engage them with the toy and then leave for a shorter amount of time, return and praise. See 'Home Alone' info sheet.

Our dogs are not vindictive - they just know how to make their own fun! If we are consistent in ensuring inappropriate objects are kept out of their reach through the early stages of their life with you, and lots of suitable toys are provided for them to engage with instead, they will learn what is appropriate for them to chew on.

