Pica (Eating Things That Aren't Food)

The consumption of nonfood items is a disorder called pica. Although pica can be a sign that a dog’s diet is lacking in some nutrient, when pica occurs in puppies and young dogs the most common culprit is boredom. Occasionally, eating nonfood items develops into compulsive behavior, resulting in a dog who’s highly motivated to find and consume specific objects. Rock eating is the most common form of pica, but dogs compulsively consume a variety of inedible objects, including plastic bags and containers, human clothing and wooden objects.

Why Does My Dog Do It?

Normal Puppy Behavior
Puppies eat all kinds of objects, including nonfood items. Although behavior experts aren’t sure why they do it, many puppies tend to chew and swallow inedible things during investigation of their environments. Most puppies grow out of this behavior by six months of age without anything but mild discouragement from their owners.

Compulsive Disorder
After the normal puppy investigation stage, some dogs continue to consume nonfood items. If you live with a junk-eating adult dog, she may suffer from a compulsive disorder. If she does, you'll notice that she seems frequently and intensely motivated to find and eat specific nonfood objects, such as rocks, plastic bags, wood or clothing. Compulsive behavior won’t go away on its own, so if your dog often gobbles things that aren’t really food, you’ll need to help her overcome her problem with special training. Please see our article, Compulsive Behavior in Dogs, for more information.

Grass or Soil Eating
Dogs often eat grass. Some dogs graze when they feel nauseous in an attempt to make themselves vomit, and some dogs graze to improve digestion. Dogs may also eat grass to get rid of worms or remedy other kinds of stomach problems. Grass and soil may serve as dietary supplements, too. As long as a dog only eats grass or soil occasionally, this kind of pica doesn’t usually cause problems.

Other Reasons Why Dogs Eat Nonfood Items

Destructive Chewing
The majority of canine chewing activity doesn’t lead to actual ingestion. However, when your dog gnaws on something to satisfy her urge to chew, she may swallow some pieces of whatever she’s chewing or tearing up. This isn’t considered pica.

Various Medical Conditions
Your dog may ingest nonfood items because of a digestive disorder, a parasitic infestation, a metabolic disorder, a nutritional deficiency/dietary imbalance or poisoning. Before concentrating on changing your dog’s behavior, see your veterinarian to rule out possible physical problems.

Resolving a Pica Problem
If your dog has a pica problem, providing plenty of appropriate things for her to play with and chew, along with interactive play opportunities with you, such as throwing a ball or playing tug-of-war, might resolve the issue and prevent the development of compulsive behavior. Keep in mind that when you give your dog
appropriate chew items and toys, you'll need to make sure that they're extremely durable so that she doesn't bite off large chunks and choke. Feeding your dog higher-quality dog food can resolve the problem if it's diet-related, but if you suspect a nutrition problem, you should also consult your veterinarian.

Pica in Puppies

- Provide plenty of mental exercise to keep your puppy busy. Give her a variety of toys and safe things to chew, such as a Tricky Treat™ ball, food-stuffed KONGS™ and Buster® Cubes.
- Provide plenty of physical exercise, too. Play tug and fetch with your puppy, go on walks together and let her play with dog buddies.
- Monitor your puppy at all times. Verbally discourage your puppy whenever you see her start to pick up something she shouldn't eat. Redirect her attention to appropriate treats and toys instead.
- If your puppy starts to eat any nonfood items, quickly take them out of her mouth. Inedible objects can cause illness or internal blockages if your puppy swallows them.

What to Do About Compulsive Pica

If you're trying to resolve compulsive pica, you should seek guidance from a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or Associate CAAB) or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB). Please see our article, Finding Professional Help, for information about locating one of these professionals in your area. If you can't find a behaviorist in your area, you can seek help from a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT), but be sure the trainer is qualified to help you. Determine whether she or he has education and experience successfully treating compulsive pica, as this expertise is not required for CPDT certification.

You could also try to manage your dog's pica problem on your own using some of the following suggestions:

- Whenever possible, prevent access to all nonfood items that your dog tries to consume. Always supervise your dog carefully when she's not in a safe dog-proofed area. If you think your dog might try to eat something she shouldn't, put it away so that it's out of her reach. You can also muzzle your dog when you think she might snatch and swallow nonfood items. For example, if your dog loves to pick up and consume rocks, you can try using a muzzle when walking her outside. Be sure to use a basket muzzle to ensure that your dog can pant and drink water. If you need help teaching your dog to wear a muzzle, please see our article, Teaching Your Dog to Wear a Muzzle, for more information.
- Verbally discourage your dog whenever you see her start to pick up nonfood items. Try to redirect her attention to appropriate treats and toys instead. Praise her happily when she looks at or picks up a toy.
- If your dog starts to eat a nonfood item, quickly but gently take it out of her mouth. Inedible objects can cause illness or internal blockages if your dog swallows them.
- Provide lots of mental and physical exercise. Try giving your dog a variety of toys, such as a Tricky Treat™ ball, food-stuffed KONGS™ and safe things to chew. Play tug and fetch with her, go on walks together and let her play with dog buddies.
- Talk to your vet about the possibility of using medications to decrease your dog's stress and compulsive behavior.
- Teach your dog to reliably come when called. Then you can use that skill to call her away from dangerous items that she might pick up and try to eat.
- Teach your dog the “leave it” cue, and then use it to ask her to leave inedible objects alone. For more information, please see our article, Teaching Your Dog to “Leave It.”
- Teach your dog the “drop it” cue. Then use it to ask her to spit out any nonfood items she picks up—before she swallows them.

- Train your dog to perform a specific behavior, such as sit or bark on command, whenever she discovers anything similar to the nonfood items she usually tries to eat. Teaching a new skill will enable you to prevent your dog from eating dangerous inedible objects and reward her for some other behavior you like better. Your dog can’t bark at an object and eat it at the same time!

- Use taste deterrents on nonfood items your dog might try to eat. Useful, safe taste deterrents for dogs include finely ground black pepper, crushed hot pepper, Tabasco® sauce and Grannick’s Bitter Apple® spray or gel. You must consistently apply whichever deterrent you choose to all desirable items your dog can access. You might need to use the deterrent for many weeks or even many months to convince your dog that all desirable nonfood items always taste bad. For maximum effect, restrict her access to water for 10 to 20 minutes after she tastes an object coated in deterrent so that she can’t immediately wash away the yucky taste by drinking. If you see your dog approaching an item you’ve treated with deterrent, say “Leave it,” just as she begins to taste it. If she turns away from the object and looks at you, praise and pet her. After several repetitions of the sequence above, start to say “Leave it” just as your dog reaches a deterrent-treated object to taste it. If she turns away from the object instead of picking it up, praise and pet her. If you repeat this sequence, she’ll learn to associate the warning cue, “Leave it,” with the bad taste. Eventually, you’ll be able to use this cue to discourage your dog from picking up any desirable object. **Note:** It’s hard to permanently get rid of pica, so you’ll occasionally need to leave tempting objects treated with deterrent lying around to remind your dog that it’s not a good idea to gobble up nonfood items. For more detailed information, please see our article, Using Taste Deterrents.

- Use a punishment device that you can activate remotely (from a distance) so that your dog doesn’t associate the unpleasant event with you. Loud air horns and remote-controlled citronella collars work well as remote punishers. If you choose to try a collar, you must let your dog wear it for 10 to 14 days before you actually use it to deliver the unpleasant spray. If you don’t, she’ll associate the punishment with the collar and learn to engage in pica behavior whenever she isn’t wearing it.

If you decide to use a remote punisher of any kind, follow these important guidelines:

1. For maximum effectiveness, make sure that your dog doesn’t see or hear you when she gets punished. Ideally, you want her to be totally unaware of your presence. Position yourself in a place where you can observe your dog without her realizing that you’re watching.

2. Keep a close eye on your dog when you notice her investigating an object she might try to eat. The instant you see her reach toward it or open her mouth to pick it up, blast the air horn or activate the citronella collar. If your timing’s very good, your dog will startle and leap away from the object.

3. You must use the remote punisher **every time** your dog attempts to eat a nonfood item until she clearly avoids similar items for several weeks. Keep in mind that pica can return, even after you’ve used punishment to reduce the behavior. Periodically, you might need to use a remote punisher again.

- Another approach to the treatment of pica is taste aversion conditioning (training). Taste aversion works by making your dog sick. It’s different than using a taste deterrent or remote punisher, and it can work well to reduce pica. However, taste aversion isn’t practical if your dog is eating things that will harm him like stones or other dangerous objects. Taste aversion treatment requires the services of a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or Associate CAAB) or veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB).