

Nutrition and Health
By Dr. David Kronfeld

Distasteful Dilemma

Whenever I go to a Dog Show, a lovely lady in tennis shoes approaches me on my own with a furtive look and poses an intimate question. My answer, at least the first of many, is for her to try the same defense which she uses against her husband (or lover) whenever he eats onions. You have had the answer. Can you guess the question?

Coprophagy, Anyone?

Unlike tennis or the tango, this game is better played by one. The lady is horrified, of course, by her sweet and lovable pooch eating poops, but she would tolerate that if said pooch would keep his distance. Instead, for a second course, he likes to smooch with his missus. "He eats it then comes straight to my face and tries to kiss me." By this time the stuff has long gone the way of all ingesta to the sterilizing influence of the highly acidic stomach but the memory lingers on. "So," she says, "You recommend that I should eat onions before my dog swallows that stuff then licks my face." We have just begun a charming conversation.

In a lovely book on canine nutrition, the late Clyde McCay of Cornell suggests that feces is not much different, in terms of its creation and composition, from cheese. So why should folk who chew cheddar deny the dog a similar delicacy? The stuff is often nutritionally superior and more digestible than the food originally consumed. And undoubtedly tastier, especially if the food was made from inexpensive feedstuffs which dogs hardly ever consumed during their evolution.

A practitioner from Texas, Dr. McQuiston, suggests that dogs eat feces in a quest for digestive enzymes, especially those which digest starch. He points out that the habit is stronger in more primitive breeds, like German Shepherds or Huskies. McQuiston's quest provides the basis for two ways of handling coprophagy---feeding starch-digesting enzymes, or feeding less starch. There is only one other way, behavioral modification.

You can choose between the nutritional and behavioral approaches by a little test. Feed the dog very well on its usual diet. Carefully observe the poops which it eats. Then stop feeding its food, let it eat remaining poops, and compare them with the feces produced on the second time through. If the feces were pale, abundant, perhaps mushy or foamy on the first appearance, but denser, darker and firmer after a second passage, then you have seen that the dog's digestive system did not cope well at first but did better when given a second chance. Now you should try a digestive form of intervention.

Many veterinarians recommend the use of pills which contain pancreatic enzymes, like Viokase or DiGest. These will help the dog handle much dietary carbohydrate. Alternatively, just feed less carbohydrate-rich dry food and more of the more expensive products which contain less cereal and more meat and meat byproducts. This is usually effective for a few days or weeks, sometimes forever. If the dog relapses, I look for a behavioral solution.

There is not uncommonly a history of deprivation of attention. The dog's owner gets another pet or major interest. The dog feels neglected and literally eats feces to show its loss. Rejection turns love to hate, so coprophagy becomes a simple replacement therapy.

The difficulty lies in showing the dog that it is loved but that its nasty habit is not. That requires a reprimand associated with coprophagy plus abundant positive reinforcement at other times. Our heroine often confides in me that she has whomped the dog very hard without avail. A reprimand makes its point with proper timing and communication rather than with physical violence. A sharp voice and a smart tap on the cheek when he has just grabbed a morsel may set the stage for a petting session, soft words and a treat or little snack of something tasty. Try cheese. If that does not work on the dog, try it yourself. Limberger is very nice with a touch of onion.