

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training



Why Do Dogs Eat Rocks and Other Strange Things?

Dogs eat a lot of strange things that, from our point of view, make no sense, such as eating rock, their own or another animal's stool, dirt, bark, etc. Although difficult to understand, it's relatively normal behavior, especially for young dogs.

Clearly, chewing rocks and other non-food items can be dangerous to your dog's teeth, but it can also lead to intestinal blockage, vomiting, diarrhea, or even choking. If the rock is large enough to block your dog's throat, it can lead to an emergency visit to the vet's office, and surgery to remove the ingested rock(s).

What causes this bizarre behavior? There are a number of options that range from *medical to behavioral*. Chewing rocks may be a symptom of a medical issue or one way for an attention-starved dog to get noticed. The dog may even be acting out due to boredom, anxiety or frustration. Or it may be nothing more than an outlet for chewing!

Is it a Medical Issue?

Eating rocks is one of the more common non-food objects dogs may gnaw on. This behavior is sometimes called *pica*, the term is defined as an eating disorder defined by continual eating of non-nutritive substances such as rocks, bark, plaster, paint, paper, dirt, string, wood, etc.

Action:

- First see your veterinarian to rule out any medical issues. It may be a disorder of the intestinal tract, nutrient deficiency, such as iron, or it could be linked to Diabetes. If it is a medical issue, your veterinarian may prescribe a behavioral drug to treat the pica.

If it is behavioral, what can I do?

Action:

- First and foremost, please do not scold your dog. If the behavior is to get attention, scolding may even "reward" the behavior. Scolding after the fact is useless; he or she won't connect the "correction" with the behavior. If he or she is anxious, scolding may make the problem worse.
- Always keep your dog leashed when walking to stop him from eating inappropriate or dangerous items. If your dog runs in your backyard, clear out rocks and other dangerous items or keep him with you under supervision. (In other words, don't just tie your dog up to restrict his movement and then leave him.)
- Teach him "Leave it" just as you would for other items that may be dangerous. See article on obedience cues for more information.

- Keep several chew toys on hand, and rotate them every several days. This will keep their interest and focused on appropriate chewing items. For example, you can try a Kong™ filled with peanut butter (if you put about 2 tablespoons of smooth peanut butter in the Kong and freeze it, it will keep their interest longer).
- If you catch your dog eating rocks or other harmful things, you may want to startle him out of the behavior with a loud noise (coach whistle, bang two pots or metal dog bowls together) or spray bottle with water in it. Remember to praise him when he leaves items alone.
- Is your dog left alone most of the time? In that case, spending more time with your dog will probably help. Make sure you play with your dog, work on training, take daily walks, etc.
- Making sure he is getting enough exercise is very important; he may not want to eat rocks and other strange things if he is tired from play and or exercise.

Overall, we recommend you stay with your dog and supervise him closely while he is in the yard. This may not be convenient, but it is the only way to prevent him from eating rocks or other harmful items.

References:
Alex Lieber
Wikipedia