



## **Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals**

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### **How to Solve the Digging Problem**

Digging is a normal behavior for most dogs, but may occur for widely varying reasons. Your dog may be:

- Seeking entertainment
- Seeking escape
- Seeking attention
- Seeking comfort or protection
- Seeking prey

Dogs don't dig, however, out of spite, revenge, or a desire to destroy your yard. Finding ways to make the area where the dog digs unappealing may be effective, however, it's likely that he'll just begin digging in other locations or display other unacceptable behavior, such as chewing or barking. A more effective approach is to address the cause of the digging, rather than creating location aversions.

#### **Seeking Entertainment**

Dogs may dig as a form of self-play when they learn that roots and soil "play back." Your dog may be digging for entertainment if:

- He's left alone in the yard for long periods of time without opportunities for interaction with you
- His environment is relatively barren, without playmates or toys.
- He's a puppy or adolescent (under three years old) and doesn't have other outlets for his energy
- He's the type of dog (like a terrier) that is bred to dig as part of his "job."
- He's a particularly active type of dog (like the herding or sporting breeds) who needs an active job to be happy.
- You've recently been gardening or working in the yard, making the dirt more attractive for digging.

#### **Recommendations:**

We recommend expanding your dog's world and increasing his "people time" in the following ways:

- Walk your dog regularly. It's good exercise, mentally and physically, for both of you.
- After reaching physical maturity (at about 18 months), your dog can go for a jog with you. Take your dog for short jogs at first, then slowly increase the distance you cover. Dogs that were bred to perform physically exhausting tasks, like Labrador retrievers, Border Collies, and Siberian Huskies, can really appreciate a good run. Don't forget to get approval from your vet before taking part in more strenuous activities.
- Teach your dog to play ball, Frisbee, or tug and practice with him as often as possible.

- Teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks. Practice these commands/tricks every day for five to ten minutes.
- Take an obedience class with your dog and practice daily what you've learned.
- Keep interesting toys in the yard to keep your dog busy even when you're not around. (Kong-type toys filled with treats or busy-box toys). Rotating the toys makes them seem new and interesting.
- For dedicated diggers, provide an "acceptable digging area." Choose a corner of the yard where it's okay for your dog to dig and cover the area with loose soil or sand. Half bury some interesting toys, including stuffed Kongs, in the pit, so that your dog will have treasures to unearth, making the digging at that spot even more rewarding. If you see that your dog is about to start digging (he sniffs around very intently and/or paws softly at the dirt), take the dog to his designated digging area. When he digs in the approved spot, reward him with praise. Make the unacceptable digging spots unattractive (at least temporarily) by setting sharp rocks or chicken wire into the dirt.

### **Seeking Prey**

Dogs may try to pursue burrowing animals or insects that live in your yard. Your dogs may be pursuing prey if:

- The digging is in a very specific area, usually not at the boundaries of the yard.
- The digging is at the roots of a tree or shrubs.
- The digging is in a "path" layout.

### **Recommendations:**

We recommend that you search for possible signs of pests and then rid your yard of them. Avoid methods that could be toxic or dangerous to your pets.

### **Seeking Comfort or Protection**

In hot weather, dogs may dig holes in order to lie in the cool dirt. They may also dig to provide themselves with shelter from cold, wind or rain, or to try to find water. Your dog may be digging for protection or comfort if:

- The holes are near foundations of buildings, large shade trees or a water source.
- Your dog doesn't have a shelter or his shelter is exposed to the hot sun or cold winds.
- You find evidence that your dog is lying in the holes he digs.

### **Recommendations:**

We recommend that you provide your dog with other sources for the comfort or protection he seeks.

- Provide an insulated doghouse. Make sure it affords protections from wind and sun.
- Your dog may still prefer a hole in the ground, in which case you can try the "approved digging area" recommendation described above. Make sure the allowed digging area is in a protected spot.
- Provide plenty of fresh water in a bowl that can't be tipped over.
- Provide your dog with a kiddie pool full of cool water, if he seems to be seeking relief from the heat.

### **Seeking Attention**

Any behavior can become attention-getting behavior if dogs learn that they receive attention for engaging in it (even punishment is a form of attention). Your dog may be digging to get attention if:

- He digs in your presence.
- His other opportunities for interaction with you are limited.

### **Recommendations:**

We recommend that you ignore the behavior.

- Don't give your dog attention for digging (remember, even punishment is attention).

- Make sure your dog has sufficient time with you on a daily basis, so he doesn't have to resort to misbehaving to get your attention.
- Take part in basic obedience or basic manners classes with your dog, so that he can learn appropriate ways to earn your attention.

### **Seeking Escape**

Dogs may escape to get something, to get somewhere, or to get away for something. For more detailed information, please see our handout: "The Canine Escape Artist." Your dog may be digging to escape if:

- He digs along the fence line.
- He digs under the fence.

### **Recommendations:**

We recommend the following in order to keep your dog in the yard while you work on the behavior modifications recommended in our handout: "The Canine Escape Artist."

- Bury chicken wire at the base of the fence (sharp edges rolled under).
- Place large rocks, partially buried, along the bottom of the fence line.
- Bury the bottom of the fence one to two feet under the ground.
- Lay chain link fence on the ground (anchored to the bottom of the fence) to make it uncomfortable for your dog to walk near the fence.

### **Regardless of the reason for digging, we don't recommend:**

- Punishing a dog at all for digging. Not only does punishment not address the cause of the behavior, it can also cause digging that's motivated by fear or anxiety to be made worse. Punishment may also cause anxiety in dogs that aren't currently fearful.
- Staking a dog out near a hole he has dug or filling the hole with water. These techniques address neither the cause of the behavior nor the act of digging.

### **REMEMBER**

There is simply no substitute for providing your dog with appropriate, supervised enrichment. Dogs are intelligent and highly energetic animals who need outlets for physical and mental energy to remain healthy. If appropriate, stimulating activities are not provided to them by their owners, dogs will see fit to find their own enrichment through activities such as digging, escaping, barking, and chewing.

Need help addressing your dog's digging problem? Call the Houston SPCA's behavior specialists at 713-869-7722, ext. 187, or email [animals@hspca.org](mailto:animals@hspca.org).