

Why Do Dogs Eat Grass?

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Grass ingestion is one of the most commonly observed and misunderstood behaviors of dogs. Over the years, many theories have developed in attempts to explain this behavior. Most of these theories describe grass ingestion as a form of self-medication or dietary supplementation amongst dogs that are sick or have a nutrient deficiency. However, many dogs eat grass on a regular basis without ever showing clinical signs of illness. Could grass ingestion possibly be an early warning sign of an inevitable medical condition or nutrient deficiency? Or is there another reason for this behavior? Recent research has explored these possibilities, and their results might surprise you.



In order to better understand grass ingestion amongst domestic dogs, we must first understand the dietary requirements of these animals as well as the prevalence of this behavior among wild canids, such as wolves and coyotes. Domestic and wild dogs are omnivores, which means their diet is composed of foods from both animal and plant origin. Domestic dogs receive their dietary requirements from the store-bought, well-balanced foods we provide for them. Wild dogs satisfy their dietary needs by ingesting large prey, including the viscera, or abdominal contents, which contain partially digested plant matter. This partially digested plant matter provides fiber, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals that are essential to the diet of a wild canid. Grass ingestion among domestic dogs may be related to this instinctive behavior. However, fresh grass does not provide the essential nutrients provided by partially digested plant matter. This raises the question of whether there is an underlying biological reason for this behavior.



The UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine performed a survey in 2007 regarding grass ingestion among dogs and the correlation between this behavior and illness. This study revealed that although grass ingestion was common among dogs, no relationship with clinical illness was identified. However, some dogs were observed vomiting after eating grass. These dogs, although clinically healthy, did not have access to grass regularly. Further investigation revealed that dogs without regular access to grass were more likely to vomit after ingesting it. It is now believed that grass can act as a stomach irritant in dogs that are unaccustomed to it. It is possible some dogs may learn to associate grass eating with vomiting and seek it out when they are feeling ill. However, this study revealed that grass ingestion does not appear to be a form of self-medication in dogs with clinical illness.

The University of New England in Australia released a study in 2007 that associated the behavior of excessive grass ingestion to hunger. This study revealed that dogs were more likely to eat grass before a meal and were less likely to eat grass when they were satiated, or feeling full. Although dogs acquire few nutrients from grass ingestion, this study revealed that grass is seen as a food source and provides bulk used to create a feeling of satiety. Several follow-up studies have been performed that have successfully reduced grass ingestion in dogs by increasing dietary fiber supplementation and feeding smaller meals more frequently.

Another ongoing study performed is investigating the prevalence of grass ingestion among dogs with intestinal parasite infestations. Other animals, such as chimpanzees, consume nutritionally deficient plant material in order to expel intestinal parasites. The plant material passes through the intestinal tract, increasing intestinal motility and wrapping around the worms thereby purging the tract of intestinal parasites. Preliminary results reveal that dogs that are more susceptible to developing parasite infestations are more likely to eat grass. Although the connection has not yet been confirmed, it is believed that this too is a possible reason for grass ingestion.

In conclusion, ingestion of small amounts of grass is a normal and common behavior among dogs. This behavior is most likely instinctual and closely related to the ingestion of partially digested plants by wild canids. Although eating grass is not associated with clinical disease, some dogs may vomit after the event, especially if the dog is unaccustomed to eating grass. Excessive grass ingestion may simply be due to hunger. In such cases, this behavior may be reduced by increasing the frequency of meals or providing an appropriate amount of fiber supplementation in order to increase satiety. Any dog that appears ill before or after ingesting grass should be evaluated for underlying medical conditions such as gastrointestinal disease, intestinal parasite infestations, and plant or chemical toxicity.



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