

Dog 101

Dogs and Digging: What to do about it

Digging is a normal behavior for most dogs and may occur for a variety of reasons, but that doesn't make it any less frustrating for dog lovers. Learn more about why your dog may be digging and what you can do about it.

Digging for 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 bare 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 that is bred to dig as part of his "job," like a terrier.
- He's a particularly active type of dog who needs an active job to be happy, like the herding or sporting breeds.
- He's recently seen you "playing" in the dirt (gardening).

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!
- Teach your dog to fetch a ball or Frisbee, and practice with him often.
- Teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks. Practice these commands or 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, such as KONG®-type toys filled with treats or busy-box toys. Rotating the toys makes them seem new and interesting.

tip

For dedicated diggers, provide an "acceptable digging area." Choose an area of the yard where it's okay for your dog to dig and cover the area with loose soil or sand. If you catch your dog digging in an unacceptable area, take the dog to his designated digging area and when he digs there, reward him with praise or treats.

Digging to look for prey

Dogs may try to pursue burrowing animals or insects that live in your yard. Your dog 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 trees 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.

Digging for 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 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, such as an insulated doghouse that offers protection from wind and sun.

However, your dog may still prefer a hole in the ground, in which case you can try the "approved digging area" recommendation above. Make sure the allowed digging area is in a protected spot, and make sure to provide plenty of fresh water in a nearby bowl that can't be tipped over.

Digging for 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—and remember, even punishment is attention! Rather, make sure your dog has sufficient time with you on a daily basis, so he doesn't resort to bad behavior in order to get your attention.

Digging for escape

Dogs may escape to get to something, to get somewhere, or to get away from something. Your dog may be digging to escape if:

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

Recommendations: In order to keep your dog in the yard while you work on the behavior modifications, we recommend the following:

- 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.

If you are patient and observant with your dog, you can learn a lot about why he or she may be digging. And with a loving response and some careful methods, you can help them dig less.