Why Does My Dog Lick (Everything) So Much?

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Dogs like to lick: themselves, you, surfaces, objects and other dogs. It’s a common behavior across the animal kingdom, but we take particular notice of our dogs because they live with us. Intermittent licking is perfectly normal, but excessive licking has a wide range of potential causes that are worth checking about. Here’s what to look for, and some ways to help.

Some Licking Is Natural for Dogs

When your dog invests a normal amount of time and effort in licking themselves, it’s probably just regular grooming. It’s also not unusual for your dog to lick other dogs’ faces. If it’s an unknown dog, this is a nonthreatening gesture that may also be establishing dominance. If the other dog is one of your pooch’s pals, it’s a warm, wet hello and maybe a bit of grooming between friends.

Your dog probably licks you as well — just like with your dog’s friends, this is generally a sign of affection and acceptance into the pack. It might also have something to do with the saltiness of your skin or something tasty you got on your clothes. As long as your furry friend just gives you a brief licking now and then, and their breath isn’t on the smelly side,

all is probably well.

When to Be Concerned About Licking

Sometimes what appears to be odd licking behavior has a reasonable explanation. Some dogs lick windows or tiled floors because they like the texture. If you see a dog licking at the air, they might simply have something stuck to the roof of their mouth or in their teeth, or they could just be trying to snag a potent smell floating in the breeze. But if their licking seems excessive, here are some potential causes to consider and ways to help.

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Dog Allergies

What’s going on with dogs who lick themselves way past good grooming? If they’re focused on their paws or any other part of their body for no obvious reason, an allergy might be the culprit.

Try cleaning your dog’s paws with pet wipes or a wet washcloth after coming in from the outdoors to see if that reduces the licking. If you suspect allergies, the best bet is calling the vet. Your vet can identify if your dog has an allergy, and may prescribe an antihistamine or suggest a pet shampoo to help them feel more comfortable.

Dog Nausea

Surprisingly, licking may be a sign your dog is feeling nauseous! It’s thought that the feeling of tummy trouble sometimes prompts dogs to lick surfaces, objects and their own lips.

If you see these signs from your dog for more than 24 hours, reach out to your vet right away. Be sure to tell them if you’ve been seeing other signs that they aren’t feeling their best (like not eating or being sick).

Dog Mental Health

If physical connections are ruled out, behavior and neurological issues may be the cause. Studies have found that licking increases endorphins in the brain, which calms the dog down — licking could be their way of responding to stress, anxiety or boredom.

If you think your dog’s mental health may be a reason for their licking habit, the vet will be able to help you identify what’s going on and how best to support your dog’s health. Your

vet wants your dog to be happy and healthy just as much as you do, so tell them everything you can about your dog’s behavior and well-being!

How to Handle Excessive Licking

Now let’s look at some ways to manage your dog’s licking habit.

Talk to Your Vet

If you’ve noticed a pattern of excessive licking, your veterinarian needs your help in understanding why it’s happening. Capture as many details as you can about your dog’s licking behavior: when it started, any major changes in your life or home when it first occurred, when licking happens, how long they lick for, whether your dog can be distracted while licking, if they start again after being interrupted, and so on. You are the foremost expert on your dog and what they go through day to day, so the more you can share with your vet, the better your chances of getting an accurate diagnosis and treatment plan.

Try Distractions

Your dog may respond well to some simple solutions to this tricky licking issue. If your vet thinks it’s a good idea, behavioral modification or distraction techniques may be a good option. When your dog starts licking, try sidetracking them with a favorite toy or treat to shift focus. Get excited and grab the leash for a walk or jingle the car keys as you get ready for a drive. Try diversions like brushing your dog, playing fetch or engaging them in a fun game. If you can get your dog to associate less licking or stopping licking with positive experiences, hopefully the excessiveness will diminish or disappear.

Change Your Dog’s Environment

Changing the world around your dog may help them shift their licking behavior, so ask your vet for ideas. Creating a calming environment with drops for your dog’s water, calming treats, pheromone collars or anxiety shirts may help. Are there environmental triggers for your dog’s licking? Jarring noises, bright lights, power tools and other disturbances can all be triggers for licking. If you’re looking for licking triggers to adjust, review the log you’ve been keeping for your vet about your dog’s licking. That should help you connect the dots back to specific conditions that compel the behavior. Adjust your home to make it as stress-free as possible for your dog.

Discourage Licking with Apple Cider Vinegar

Ask your vet about using dilute apple cider vinegar. If you get the OK, try spraying dilute solution of apple cider vinegar on your dog’s skin and coat to deter over-grooming. If you or something in your home is the target of your dog’s tongue, test the spray there as well. Solutions like these may be enough to help on their own!

If you find yourself face to furry face with an excessive licker, be patient, take detailed notes and seek veterinary help. Excessive licking can affect your dog’s quality of life — and yours — but nobody wants their dog to stop licking completely. It’s part of what makes your dog a dog!

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