

How to Solve the Digging Problem

© Denver Dumb Friends League and Humane Society of the United States. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

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

- ❖ seeking entertainment
- ❖ seeking comfort or protection
- ❖ seeking escape
- ❖ seeking prey
- ❖ seeking attention

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
- ❖ He's recently seen you "playing" in the dirt (gardening)



Recommendations:

We recommend expanding your dog's world and increasing his "people time" 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 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 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, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise, say, "no dig" and 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 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.

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 protection 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.

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.

Seeking Escape

Dogs may escape to get to something, to get somewhere or to get away from 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 fencing 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:

- ❖ Punishment after the fact. Not only does this not address the cause of the behavior, any digging that's motivated by fear or anxiety, will be made worse. Punishment may also cause anxiety in dogs that aren't currently fearful.
- ❖ Staking a dog out near a hole he's dug or filling the hole with water. These techniques don't address the cause of the behavior, or the act of digging.