

Your pet's poop can reveal important truths

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As crazy as this sounds, gazing into your pet's excrement can reveal aspects of the past, present, and future. No soothsayer hocus-pocus here -- just plain everyday folk medicine of the most practical kind. Any concerned pet owner has the ability to do this simple examination, and it's guaranteed to help you maintain and even improve the overall health of an animal.

For first-timers, though, the mere discussion of this topic may be unpleasant. You'll get over it, once you learn how invaluable an investigative tool it can be. If you're into smart pet parenting, you'll be interested in looking into poop...literally.

Cats and dogs -- our typical pets -- usually defecate one to three times a day. An immediate check of the stools can reveal red flags, alerting you to health, behavioral, and dietary issues requiring explanation and action, perhaps even treatment by a veterinarian. The key is to look for abnormalities that continue for more than a day or two.

First, notice the amount of stool. If your pet is defecating more than the usual number of times per day, and if the stools increase in size, this could indicate that the animal is being overfed (which could lead to obesity) or that its system isn't utilizing food properly. Check the food quality; fillers like corn have little nutritional value and will increase feces volume, although certain dogs do need corn to help harden their stools. Little or no stool throughout the day might indicate constipation, dehydration, or something worse, like intestinal obstruction.

Crystal Ball in a Scoop

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
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Color usually reflects the pet's diet. Food with high animal protein content tends to create dark mustard to cocoa brown feces, which is normal. Corn content adds a yellowy pigment; orange and green are from other veggies.

Unusual colors signal health changes. A sudden yellow could mean parasitic infection like giardia. Grayish stools are usually due to fatty food (nix those table scraps). Black, tarry stools are indications of digested blood being passed through the system. This could be caused by anything from an intestinal irritation to oozing tumors. Red is a sign of fresh blood in the lower digestive tract, which means there's internal bleeding and time for veterinary attention.

Stool consistency is an important indicator of pet health. Elongated and somewhat firm, dryish stools are healthy. Hard chunks could be caused by lack of water intake. Overly soft stools have myriad causes: change of diet, food allergies, digestive issues, intestinal parasites, and stress. Liquid or bloody diarrhea is a serious condition that will quickly cause dehydration, requiring immediate vet care if it occurs in young animals. Intestinal infections (parasitic, bacterial, or parvovirus), pancreatitis, colitis, and bad reactions to antibiotics are likely culprits. Mucousy stools could also herald parvo or parasitic infection.

It's normal for dogs and cats to have foul-smelling poop. Meat protein contains high amounts of sulfides, and after intestinal fermentation, gas creation, and anal gland involvement in the process, bad odor is released. Off-the-charts smelly poop indicates something more serious, as it's often associated with parasitic infection or the bloody diarrhea of parvo. This virus can kill in just a few hours if left untreated.

Most intestinal parasites are common, yet unwanted in a pet's digestive tract. They can be discovered in a pet's stool under a microscope, easily identified through a veterinary fecal flotation exam. A fresh sample is collected and checked for hookworms, roundworms, whipworms, giardia, and coccidia. Parasitic infections won't go away untreated and will often lead to weight loss and diarrhea. Tapeworms, though, can be seen with the naked eye. Often spotted in the first bowel movement of the day, they look like grains of rice. Worming treatments flush out parasites, making spaghetti-like roundworms shockingly visible in the stool.

Foreign objects can also have a way of winding up in pet poop. Things like socks, paper towels, children's toys, and rocks in the stool highlight a behavioral issue and present risks of intestinal

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blockage and perforation. Dogs do need to chew, so it's important to leave pet-friendly toys out and about, while keeping household items out of reach. Training techniques might be the answer to ridding unwanted chewing behavior.

Pay attention as well to grass in animal stools. Eating grass is fine for cows, but for dogs and cats, it's often an indication of stress, anxiety, or digestive issues possibly caused by stress.

Pet professionals see all sorts of stuff in animal poop. A dog I worked with in a family of young children had a bad habit that showed itself in his crayon-colored feces. When condoms started showing up instead, I knew he was moving on to the bathroom trash. Playing poop detective, and following up with a little supervision and behavior modification, can help solve these kinds of annoying problems with pets.

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