

Why do dogs dig?

- On a hot summer day dogs may dig a hole to have a cool place to lie
- To flush out prey or dig for rodents
- Pregnant dogs can dig when nesting
- Dogs dig to bury or retrieve bones
- Dogs also dig to escape from confinement
- Can occur when dogs have insufficient stimulation, exercise or attention

How can I determine why my dog is digging?

The first step in treating inappropriate digging behaviour is to determine the reason for digging. Prevention, remote punishment, and booby traps may also be needed, but reducing your dog's motivation to dig, and providing for all of your dogs needs are essential so that digging is not merely redirected to a new location. Inhibiting or preventing all digging, without understanding and dealing with the dog's motivation could result in new behaviour problems such as chewing, excessive vocalization, or escape behaviours.

Dogs that dig because they are pursuing prey will continue unless you can get rid of the prey. Dogs that dig in an attempt to get cool should be provided with a cool resting area with plenty of shade and water. On very hot days, it is best to keep your dog inside. For some dogs, digging may be an indication of not enough exercise and owner attention. Additional play and exercise times may be needed to keep digging behaviours under control, especially if your dog is young and very active. Dogs that continue to dig may require additional stimulation to keep them occupied when the owners are not around (we have several interactive toys at our store at the Calgary Humane Society). If your dog is digging, you should be outside to supervise when your dog is in the backyard. This is particularly true for the dog that digs to escape from the yard or confinement area. If you are unable to keep the dog inside because of house soiling or destruction, then you may need to address those problems first.

How can I stop inappropriate digging?

1. Provide a digging area

For some dogs it may be useful for you to create an area where the dog is allowed to dig. This could be a spot in the backyard where you have placed soft dirt and perhaps railroad ties around the area to delineate the location. Next, make this place somewhere that your dog would like to dig in. Bury things there that your pet would like to dig up. This might be food, lightly covered. Then put things deeper into the ground. If you do that (naturally when your dog is not watching!) at irregular intervals, your dog should be more likely to dig there, than other locations in your yard. Another option is to allow the dog to dig in a spot where it has already chosen, and to prevent digging in other locations by supervision, confinement (prevention), or booby-traps.

2. Supervision and punishment

Supervision and direct intervention (shaker can, verbal reprimand, water gun) can be used to prevent inappropriate digging in the owner's presence but the behaviour will likely continue in the owner's absence. Remote punishment (e.g. turning on a sprinkler), booby traps (placing chicken wire, rocks or water in the area where the pet digs), or covering the surface with one that is impervious (asphalt or patio stones) might teach the pet to avoid the digging site even in the owner's absence. These techniques do not however prevent the pet from digging in other locations.

What else can be done if inappropriate digging continues when I am not around to supervise?

When you are unavailable to supervise your dog, housing the dog indoors is the most practical solution until he or she has learned to stay outdoors without digging. At the Calgary Humane Society, we believe that dogs of all sizes are happier, healthier and safer when they can be indoors with their people the majority of the time. If you would like to continue to leave him/her outdoors, it is best to confine the dog to an area such as a pen or run, so that it has no access to the digging areas. The run should be inescapable, and could be covered with gravel, patio tiles or have an asphalt or concrete floor so that the dog cannot escape or do damage. Of course it will be necessary to provide sufficient exercise and stimulation before confining the dog and an adequate number of treats and play toys in the run to keep the dog occupied. Fresh water and protection from the elements are also a necessity. Another alternative is to provide an area within the pen or run where digging is allowed.