

Why Does My Dog Chew On My Underwear and Socks?

Gemma Johnstone

It's not uncommon for puppies to pick up things that we might have carelessly left on the floor. Soft, smelly, and stretchy socks are appealing chew toys. Without proper management and training, this sock stealing habit can become a problem—and not just because your dog is decimating your underwear drawer. Dogs that eat socks and other underwear items are at risk of suffering from [dangerous internal blockages](#).

Understanding why your dog is doing it, and taking appropriate steps to prevent it from happening in the future, could save you a costly and, worse, possibly life-threatening trip to the vet.

What Motivates a Dog to Chew On Underwear and Socks?

Dogs are often drawn to underwear because it has their owner's scent on it, and it's an easy-to-chew object. Puppies are obvious culprits during their [teething phase](#) and as they explore with their mouths. In other cases, certain breeds or individual dogs may have a propensity towards this type of habit. It will depend on their drive, energy levels, and desire to chew.

While rare, your dog may eat socks because of [a compulsive disorder called pica](#). It results in obsessive ingestion of non-food items, and stress and anxiety are common triggers. If your dog is excessively focused on eating socks or other non-food items, it is best to consult with a vet or behaviorist.

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Most commonly, though, it's just a case of the dog not getting enough alternative and appropriate enrichment. In other words, your dog could be eating your socks because of boredom!

New Jersey Dog Behavior Consultant and Author Mary Jean Alsina (CPDT-KA, PCT-A, M.A), Owner and Head Trainer of [The Canine Cure](#), has worked with dogs for over 15 years. She explains that “mental stimulation for all dogs, but especially highly intelligent, working, and driven dogs, is equally as, if not more important, than physical exercise. If that basic physiological need is not met, this is when dogs “get into trouble” and will find activities to satisfy that urge.” This includes destructive behavior and chewing items around the house.

Sometimes owners unintentionally reinforce a dog's interest in underwear. “Dogs also may find when

they grab socks; they get chased. Thus a game ensues, and this can be very rewarding,” explains Alsina.

The Risks of Underwear and Sock Chewing

It may seem like a sock eating habit is no more than a minor inconvenience, resulting in more frequent shopping trips to stock up your supplies, but internal blockages are surprisingly common.

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Dr. Elizabeth Maxwell is a Clinical Assistant Professor at the University of Florida, College of Veterinary Medicine. She was also involved in a [2019 study](#) evaluating outcomes of dogs undergoing surgical treatment for gastrointestinal foreign body obstruction. “I have pulled out many tube socks from dog intestines. Puppies are definitely a common culprit, and it can occur in any breed; however, Labradors tend to be the most over-representative breed,” she says.

If you know your dog has ingested a sock or a piece of one, it is tempting to wait to see if they manage to pass it when having a bowel movement. However, consulting with a vet is always recommended, and as quickly as possible

“In very large dogs, they can sometimes poop it out, but they should be closely monitored to make sure the sock is moving through the intestines and not getting stuck,” recommends Dr. Maxwell. She goes on to explain that “if [ingestion] happened very recently, we certainly could try to induce vomiting. If the act was not observed, but there was high suspicion (say the owner is missing a sock), abdominal radiographs or an abdominal ultrasound could help confirm the foreign material is still in the stomach.”

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For socks in the stomach, removal is possible using a less invasive endoscopy under general anesthesia. “However,” says Dr. Maxwell, “if the item has moved into the small intestines and is causing an obstruction, surgery is usually indicated to remove it.”

If you haven’t realized your dog has eaten a sock and it goes on to cause an internal blockage, some of the common signs to look out for include vomiting, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal pain, lethargy, and changes in bowel movements. Many owners assume a blockage will always result in their dog not pooping; however, [diarrhea is a common symptom](#) with a partial obstruction.

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The symptoms can develop in days, or it may be weeks before it becomes a serious problem, depending on whether it is a full or partial blockage, but you shouldn’t delay in seeking veterinary treatment. As Dr. Maxwell points out, “with a blockage, dogs can get severe dehydration and

electrolyte abnormalities. The obstruction can also put pressure on the wall of the intestines which can lead to perforation, allowing intestinal fluid to leak out and cause a severe, life-threatening infection.”

How to Stop Your Dog From Eating Socks and Underwear

There are lots of steps you can take to limit your dog’s underwear stealing days, but the most important and simple aspect is putting into place good management strategies. Without this, your dog will continue being rewarded with the opportunity to partake in an activity they enjoy. Make sure you and other family members don’t leave socks around as temptation.

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Also, as Alsina explains, “many sock chewers are bored, so providing ample outlets of exercise and [brain-stimulating activities](#) is crucial. Walks with many opportunities to stop and sniff, enrichment toys, scent work, obedience training, and other mentally stimulating activities can help many dogs forget the socks and focus on these other enticing and fun pursuits.”

She also recommends working on a solid [“leave it”](#) and [“drop it”](#) cue. That way, if your dog does spot a tempting sock left lying out, it won’t turn into a fun game of chase for them while you try to get it back. “With many dogs, a nice high-value treat of a hot dog piece, cheese, or something similar will supersede a sock, and dogs can quickly learn that dropping an item to be rewarded with something better is certainly worth their while,” she suggests.

Why Punishment Is Not an Effective Strategy

Some owners may want to tell their dog off if they catch them in the act of chewing on a sock, but this can cause more harm than good. “Punishing a dog is never recommended as it can cause a wide array of side effects, such as fear, anxiety, frustration, or aggression. In most cases, dogs are not aware that they are “committing a crime”, so yelling at them simply serves to scare them and break the bond between owner and dog,” explains Alsina. “In addition, similar to housetraining, if dogs are punished, they quickly learn to hide when engaging in the act. The best way to communicate with a dog is to always set them up for success with management, and reinforcement of the desired behaviors, so it is clear to the dog what is expected,” she recommends.

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