



## Module 14 : Learning about Dog Actions

- See why dogs chase their tails
- Why dogs roll
- Human to dog communication
- About tail movements

In this module you will learn about a variety of different dog actions, what they mean, why your dog has this behaviour, as well as the following points:

- Why dogs chase their tails
- Why dogs roll
- Human to dog communication
- About tail movements
- Circling and moments of madness

### Learning about Dog Actions - 4m45s

#### 14.1 Introduction

**From a puppy to becoming a fully grown dog certain dog behaviours or actions remain the same.** Other behaviours and actions may be trained out of your dog depending on what types of obedience and additional training your dog receives. Some behaviour is simply outgrown because your puppy becomes a dog and no longer finds certain things as entertaining.

## 14.2 Chasing Tails

**Whether you have owned a puppy before or just brought a new one home, you are probably watching your new pet chase its tail. Puppies are known to chase their tail more than grown dogs.** However, some dog breeds will continue to chase their tail well into adulthood and others may feel a compulsion to chase their tails.

**There are six reasons your dog usually tries to chase its tail:**

- Boredom
- Attention
- Genetics
- Compulsion
- Medical
- Hygiene

There is also a seventh reason your puppy might chase its tail: Puppies are learning new things every day. They also have to learn what belongs to them and how to use what they have. Many animal breeds, as well as dogs, will chase their tails until they are over a year old.

They will also chase other animals' tails, like their companion cat or dog's tail. Part of the behaviour is because it is fun. Your dog thinks it is fun to chase something that is moving. Another part of it is due to unknowns. Early on your puppy will recognise they have this moving object and that it is attached, but they may not understand the relevance, so chasing it for fun, in play and for boredom are reasons to take up the challenge of chasing one's own tail. Tail chasing as a form of play behaviour is also about hygiene. Tails can become dirty. Dogs, like cats, will clean themselves, although not always as religiously as cats.

Genetics can also play a part in how much your dog will chase its tail.

German shepherds and terriers are two of the most common breeds that will start chasing their tails as puppies and continue the behaviour as they grow older. Many vets have seen this behaviour last longer when the dogs are trapped indoors for long periods of time. Your dog might develop a compulsion to chase their tail. It may occur due to physical abuse, confinement, past injury, trauma, separation anxiety, or another psychological reason. A compulsion can damage your dog's tail and often result in hair loss. They can also do damage by biting or chewing too much.

It is important that you watch how often your puppy or older dog chases their tail to ensure there are no other concerns. Sometimes what might seem like compulsion is actually a medical problem, such as worms or fleas.

## 14.3 Rolling in Unpleasant Things

**All dogs will roll in unpleasant things but some more often than others. There are reasons for this type of behaviour:**

- Masking their scent
- Coat improvement
- Covering up a new scent
- Advertising

In the wild, where scents rule with other species, including wolves, it was and is important for scents to be masked. Sometimes scents are warnings, but when a wolf is trying to stalk prey then masking their scent is the best way to ensure this happens. We've taken this lesson and used it to mask our scents when hunting. If an animal were to smell a human around then they would run off. So masking their scent is an instinct that has carried through some generations of dogs. Evolution has reduced some of this behaviour in dogs, but not every offspring has the same genetic makeup so older instincts can show through. Coat improvement is just a theory, but there is ample evidence to suggest that a dog may use dead remains of animals or fish as a way to improve the water resistance of their fur. The fat degrading on the dead creature works as a buffer. It could also be what you have applied to their fur that prompts them to roll in things you consider unpleasant. What you might perceive to be a pleasant scent may be offensive to your dog. If you find your pet rolls in horrible things after a bath then you may want to try a different shampoo.

Advertising is all about sniffing scents, whether another dog is sniffing yours or their scent they have left behind. Your dog might want to broadcast his dirty scent to another animal. Sometimes dogs from other neighbourhood homes will smell the horrible scent and get excited about the smell, which turns out to be your dog.

## 14.4 Human to Dog Communication

**Your dog will learn to listen to your verbal and body language.** It is extremely important that you provide proper communication to your dog. They are already trying to communicate with you, but you may not have understood their communications. As you learned above about tail chasing, your dog might be telling you he/she is bored and wants something better than chasing a tail to do. You also need to communicate and watch how you say things to your dog. They will be able to tell the nuances in your voice, such as anger, happiness, sadness and other emotions. Your dog might be trying to comfort you if you are sad or angry, but it might make your emotions worse. There can be inappropriate actions or behaviour that result from your communication with your dog. They may not learn properly because they are scared due to your anger. They may see mixed signals and not know what to do. You will need to correct your dog properly and without aggression to see better behaviour from your dog or puppy.

## **How you communicate is very important.**

- Watch your tone of voice, volume, energy level and posture while communicating with your pet
- Use the same words for the same actions every time so your puppy associates the right action with the right word
- Use an assertive and calm tone with short-clipped words
- Stand tall and use your body language subtly to establish control over an independent dog

If they are doing something wrong, you might have the desire to pick them up, tell them it was bad, or move them away from what they were doing. The words and the affection can actually make your puppy or dog continue the behaviour because they got something they like from it.

Be careful you are not rewarding bad behaviour as this will lead to the continuation of that behaviour.

## **How to Talk to Your Dog so They Understand**

Your dog can understand up to 200-250 words of language. However, dogs interpret communication more on the basis of your body language than the actual spoken words.

### **Keep in mind these important don'ts to communicate better with your dog:**

- Do not lean over the puppy or dog. They perceive this as intimidation and your pet may get frightened or even aggressive. Your dog may then respond by submissive urinating to show he is not a threat to you.
- Crouch on the floor or turn sideways and allow them space to approach you instead.
- Do not make hard and unwavering eye contact. This can be scary to puppies or even dogs and they may get afraid. Avert your eyes or look away and allow the puppy to gather the courage to approach you.
- Don't pat your dog on the head as it can be alarming for him to see a large hand swooping down over him (as he sees it). Instead, offer your hand with your palm down to allow him to sniff and get comfortable with you. Scratch the side of their neck or pat the front of their chest when he gets comfortable being near you.

## **FACT**



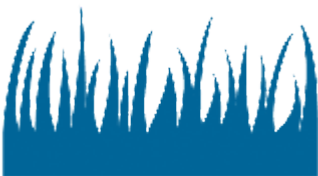
24% of the UK adult population have a dog with an estimated population of 8.9 million pet dogs. *Source:PDSA UK*

## 14.5 Tail Between their Legs

**Your dog will show their submissiveness or nervousness by placing their tail between their legs.** Tucking their tail is a definite sign that they feel uncomfortable about something. It could be your communication was read as abusive or aggressive, so the dog will tuck their tail and lower their head in fear.

Ensure you do not let your dog continue to be frightened either by you, a sound, another dog or another stimulus.

## 14.6 Eating Grass



**Eating grass may be a behaviour you mostly associate with cats, but dogs can actually show this action too.** The world of science is not 100% certain why a dog might eat grass, but there are at least three common reasons; taste, boredom and stomach distress. Dogs tend to be natural scavengers. Once you have fed them dinner it does not mean they will stop eating. They are programmed to get nutrients wherever they can find them. A diet that is lacking in fibre may have your dog eating grass. Dogs know what they need, so if you see your dog eating a lot of grass you might try to change their food. Boredom is the cause for a lot of behaviour in dogs. If your dog is outside, chained up or without enough stimuli your dog may eat grass. Try giving your

dog more exercise, challenges and time, to see if your dog stops eating the grass. The third most common reason for dogs to eat grass is stomach distress. Grass has been considered a reliever of upset tummies for dogs and cats for decades. You will see anxiety in your puppy or dog when this occurs. A dog will extend its neck, making swallowing motions and usually vomit after eating the grass because their tummy was upset.

## 14.7 Rolling Over

**For decades researchers thought dogs rolling over was a sign of submission to another dog**



**or animal.**

Now researchers believe that while dogs rolling over can be a sign of submission there is one other reason that is more common during playtime. If you see your dogs playing and one rolls over, it can be a combat tactic. Your dogs have play actions that show they were just having fun and not fighting. These exaggerated, bouncy movements are interpreted as play with other dogs. The response can be the other dog joining in the play, or the other dog may growl and walk away. If the other dog does not want to play, they will usually let it be known. Puppies might have trouble reading these signals and not back off, but the more aggressive "I don't want to play" behaviour from the other dog will be sufficient to get your puppy to back off after a few minutes. During play you may see one dog roll on the ground, acting submissive and "innocent", but then gain the upper hand or start the play bout.

## 14.8 Moments of Madness

**What dog owners might call 'moments of madness' are, for dogs, actually about having fun.**

Has your dog ever been sitting or lying quietly only to then suddenly dash around at full speed? Perhaps they are quiet and well behaved one minute and the next they are jumping and running in circles. You may have observed such moments where your dog does everything they are not supposed to do and get into a lot of trouble.

The good news is these moments are normal.

These moments are a part of everyday life, where your dog just wants to have fun and play.

In play mode expending energy is a necessity. When there is too much energy it can come through in these "moments of madness". If you observe these actions often the direct translation is that your dog is bored and needs more play time with you. It may be that they need to go out more to run and behave like a dog.

This behaviour can also be a request for you to play with them. They are trying to get your attention, particularly if they run around, stop and look directly at you. They are saying "please join me or take me out". If you worry about these moments then vary your behaviour with your dog. Take your dog out when you first get home or play with them and their toys for a little while. You do not want to

reinforce bad behaviour that might show up during these mad moments, but you can start to give more attention prior to the behaviour showing up.

## 14.9 Circling

**Circling behaviour can show up in a few ways.** Your dog might circle around a few times before they settle on their bed. They may also circle when they are forming a bed outside. During play the circling can be a fun and entertaining action, which is sometimes combined with tail-catching. If you play with toys over their head so they jump and have them go in a circle, it can become play action even without little of your involvement. Just as children enjoy going in a circle because of the dizzy, strange feeling it provides, your dog can also enjoy this sensation.

However, circling is not always a result of normal feelings in your dog. It can actually be related to psychological and medical issues.

**The following are common problems you will want to seek help for:**

- Anxiety
- Liver abnormalities or disease
- Cushing's Disease (an endocrine disorder that happens in older dogs where there is an excess of cortisol that appears as circling, pacing and aimless wandering in your dog's behaviour)
- Canine Cognitive Dysfunction (senility in dogs, where neurotransmitters are not firing properly can lead to circling, pacing and wandering)
- Brain tumour.

### Summary

This module has contained a lot of information on normal dog behaviour, as well as some abnormal behaviour that may occur in your dog. It is up to you to make certain your dog sees a vet on a regular basis to rule out any medical or psychological issues that might be affecting their normal behaviour. You should understand that some behaviour happens during puppy-hood and your pet will grow out of them. If the behaviour continues into adulthood it may be a sign of compulsion or an operant conditioning situation. As long as you assess your dog's behaviour, read their communications and provide good clear communication to your dog, you can raise a happy and healthy puppy or dog.

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