

THE CANINE BEHAVIOR SERIES

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Author and Trainer



Scavenging Outdoors

Dogs are scavengers by nature, taking treats where they can find them. It's impossible to explain to a dog that eating a particular item could cause injury or death. As a result, it has become a human responsibility to protect dogs from foraging instincts that might have been useful in the wild but can be deadly to companion dogs.

Risky Business

Several things your dog can find outdoors are harmful if swallowed. You can see some of the hazards, but others you cannot. Here are a few:

1. Toxic plants. Your veterinarian can help you find information about specific high-risk vegetation in your area. You'll especially want to know what is growing in your yard or other regular dog exercise area.
2. Plants and other surfaces contaminated by pesticides, herbicides or other toxins. Unless you happen to know that a substance has been applied or spilled in the area, these hazards can be invisible.
3. Mulch and other gardening materials that contain toxins. For example, cocoa mulch is unsafe for dogs to eat. A great many dogs love to eat rocks.
4. Animal feces and bird droppings. Animal feces can transmit parasites, bacterial infection, or virus to the dog.
5. Dead animals. Eating a dead animal can result in a bone causing gastro-intestinal obstruction, infestation of intestinal parasites, bacterial infection, or poisoning.
6. Sharp objects. Items such as discarded hypodermic needles, razor blades, broken knife blades and pieces of broken glass commonly litter the ground and may be invisible from where you stand.
7. Animals with injurious defense systems. We know what skunks do to dogs, but people are less aware that some toads and other animals can poison a dog who simply takes the animal into the mouth. Porcupine quills call for a trip to the veterinarian, insect stings in the mouth can be extremely serious, and most dogs lack any natural fear of venomous snakes.
8. Poisoned bait intended to kill pests such as mice and rats, and the bodies of pests that have died from eating poisoned bait. Rat poison is widely used and is devastating to dogs.

These are only some of the things on the ground that can hurt or kill a curious dog. A little care can spare you and your dog some ugly problems.

On Leash

Letting a dog be a dog seems like a great way to take a walk. With nose to the ground, the dog senses things about the world that humans with our weaker sense of smell will never fully understand. Unfortunately, nose to the ground puts the mouth there, too, and your dog can eat bad things.

It's wise to have a way of walking with your dog that keeps the dog's nose off the ground. The earlier in your relationship with your dog that you start this, the easier it will be.

If the dog becomes a canine vacuum cleaner, grabbing and swallowing anything and everything off the ground as the two of you walk along, sooner or later the dog is going to swallow something harmful. Once you get the dog rehabilitated from the damage, you'll be faced with either discontinuing walks or finding some way to stop the dog from doing it again. The dog will not understand that eating that item caused the illness. Dogs don't "learn from mistakes" in this way.

So, whether your pup is just starting to notice things on the ground or you're dealing with a strong scavenging habit, you're going to want to start now to retrain the dog for safer walking. Until you and the dog have developed trained behaviors to make outings safer, look for cleaner places to take your walks.

A head halter can quickly give you the ability to keep the dog's head off the ground on leashed walks, provided your dog doesn't have any neck or spinal problems that a head halter could make worse. It's best to have someone skilled in the use of head halters fit your dog, introduce the dog to the device, and teach you how to use it safely and effectively. Your veterinarian may be able to provide this instruction or refer you to someone who can.

Training

Therapy dogs and other working dogs are routinely taught a "leave it" cue because of the hazards they face on the job. Pills and contaminated medical equipment are occasionally found on the floor in a health care facility. Search and rescue dogs face even greater risks in their work. An immediate response to the handler's "leave it" can save a working dog's life.

"Leave it" is simple to teach if you prevent the dog from actually getting the item (no reward for failing to "leave it") and provide a meaningful reward (something the dog likes) when the dog listens and leaves the object on the ground alone. Repetition, repetition, repetition and more repetition are the keys to this training. If you get sloppy, the dog will, too.

A focused attention exercise is another type of training that empowers you to pilot your dog through areas with hazards on the ground. Here's one way to teach focused attention:

Stationary exercises do not work as well for this as moving exercises. If you teach your dog (let's call her Angel) to give attention to you when you say her name, you can eventually develop the ability to get and hold her attention anytime you wish. With attention (and EYES) on you, she simply has none left to get overexcited about the other dog. I learned this method from expert trainer Linda O'Hare Newsome.

Have treats on your person (later you may use a toy instead, but it helps to start with tiny, tempting treats, lots of tiny pieces), but keep them out of the dog's sight. To initiate the attention sequence, say "Angel!" and YOU MOVE ABRUPTLY away from her. If you want to say "heel" or "come" or "front" or "by me," that's fine too. The main thing is, say the dog's name - this is going to become the word on which she will learn to look at you - then MOVE.

When Angel moves with you, quickly PRAISE her. This is where you would use a clicker if you wish to use that method, but a word of praise is fine, too. Then instantly whip out a treat and give it to her. Do not show the treats until you are ready to give one. This prevents the treat from becoming, in Angel's mind, an actual part of the command, or a bribe. Each time you give a treat, align it between the dog's eyes and yours. You want eye contact from Angel with that treat. Soon you will find her seeking your eye contact. Always praise her when she does that, and it's fine to give her a "free" treat for doing it.

You're not done. When you do this sequence, always do at least three to five in a row. That means each time you: 1) say the name, 2) move, 3) praise your dog, 4) whip out a treat, and 5) give it. This doesn't necessarily take up a bunch of space, since you want it all to happen very fast. The movement is not over a great distance. You can move one direction the first time, back the other way the second time, etc. But always do at least three to five repetitions in a row before you release the dog's attention. This is what teaches her to SUSTAIN that attention on you until you release it.

Practice this exercise everywhere, including training class. You can do this with a toy, especially once you have taught it to her. But don't rush to get away from the food. Food is the easiest thing to deliver with this split-second timing, and will greatly help you in establishing the pattern of attention.

By always praising before you give the treat, you are also building up your praise in the dog's mind. This will allow you later to praise at that correct moment, and be able to deliver the treat (or toy) a bit later (when you have to walk across the room to get one, for example) while the praise maintains the continuity in the dog's mind between the action and the reward.

The attention exercise is not extremely time-consuming. Just take a few moments and do it with her in every location where you go together. It's surprising how quickly it becomes habit for the dog to look at you when you say her name--and habit for you to positively reinforce her every time she gives you her attention. People will comment on how much your dog loves you, and the obvious bond between the two of you, and they'll be right!

The focused attention exercise quickly becomes second nature to you and to the dog, and naturally blends with "leave it" training. When your dog automatically looks at you whenever you say her name and you automatically give a reward, you will have tremendous power to keep your dog safe everywhere you go together.

Off Leash

Dogs can be harmed by things they scavenge while exercising off-leash. In your own fenced yard you can create a safe place for your dog to exercise. All dogs don't get into the same hazards, so monitor your dog's behavior for special risks. For example, you'll take special precautions with the dog who learns to enjoy chewing the siding on your house, the preservative-treated lumber of your backyard deck, or things the dog drags out of a backyard storage building.

Just as you dog-proof the inside of your house, you can dog-proof the yard. There are limitations, outside, though, due to the actions of others. Animals can enter your yard through the air and trees, people can enter, and people can throw things into your yard over the fence. You'll have to decide how much risk you're taking anytime you leave the dog in the yard without you.

For each hazard in the yard, decide whether to 1) remove the hazard from the yard, 2) fence off the hazard so the dog can't get to it, 3) fence the dog into an area away from the hazard or 4) supervise your dog at all times in the yard in order to protect the dog from the hazard. If your dog lives in the house with the family, supervision can work. If the dog will be left in yard without your supervision at any time, make sure the dog cannot get to the hazard. Don't count on training a dog to leave something alone when the dog's life would be at stake if the dog broke training. Training is never 100% reliable.

If you choose to take your dog to off-leash dog parks or other places where the dog is loose at a distance from you, be aware of the risks from scavenging. Make sure your veterinarian knows of any such exposures whenever your dog is being examined, whether at a routine physical or with an illness. This information can help your veterinarian save your dog's life.

Good Habits

As you continue to practice the focused attention and "leave it" with your dog on walks, your dog will get out of the habit of scavenging from the ground. Your walks will become safer for your dog, and less worrisome for you.

Policing your yard for hazards that could harm your dog will pay big dividends, too, as will supervising your dog out there. Accidents can happen in spite of precautions, but you can greatly improve your chances of avoiding one by taking these precautions.

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Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book [Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others](#). Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.

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