

Should You Allow Your Dog to Eat Grass?

Does your dog start chomping grass the moment she gets outdoors? Should you try to stop her? This recent article offers an entirely new explanation, disputing the long-held belief that dogs eat grass to throw up. In my experience, there are 4 additional health-related reasons dogs eat grass.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent article citing small 2007 and 2010 studies of grass-eating dogs concludes the behavior is more likely connected to simple hunger, enjoyment, or boredom than as a remedy for a gastrointestinal disturbance
- Most dogs eat grass occasionally and some do it more often; there can be a few reasons for the behavior
- Dogs who munch on grass may be trying to relieve digestive upset, they may also be seeking certain nutrients their diet isn't providing
- If your dog regularly ingests large quantities of grass, make an appointment with your veterinarian, and in the meantime, consider upgrading his diet to help provide him with all the nourishment his body needs

Have you ever wondered why, after enjoying a nutritionally balanced, species-specific meal lovingly prepared (or purchased) by her devoted human (you), your furry BFF starts eating grass the second she gets outdoors? If so, you're in good company, as eating grass is a common behavior in canine companions. So common, in fact, that some surveys suggest up to 80% of pet parents report that their dogs regularly sample the grass.¹

It seems grass eating is a natural canine pastime, since research on wolves in Yellowstone National Park has found plant matter (mostly grass) in 74% of wolf poop, suggesting the behavior may be inherited.²

Study Says: Hungry Dogs Are More Likely to Eat Grass

The conventional wisdom about grass-eating in dogs is that they do it to make themselves throw up. However, a 2007 study of 12 dewormed dogs with no reported digestive problems who ate grass daily found there were few vomiting episodes (a total of 5 vomiting events across 709 grass-eating events) and the ones that did occur were after the dogs had eaten a meal.³

The main finding of the study was that dogs who had not yet been fed their daily meal were more likely to eat grass. In other words, dogs who are hungry are more likely to eat some grass.

Further, a 2010 study suggests that dogs with mild gastrointestinal (GI) issues due to something unfamiliar they're fed are actually less likely to eat grass than when eating their normal diet.⁴ Other theories, such as "dogs eat grass as a laxative," or "dogs eat grass because they're lacking fiber," also have little scientific evidence behind them (more about this shortly).

New Theories to Contemplate

The co-authors of an article in *The Conversation* offer the following guesses on the “why” of canine grass-eating:

“The answer to why your dog eats grass may simply be: because they like to. Your dog may be bored, and chewing on grass is something to do.

Maybe your dog just enjoys eating grass. Ripping grass from the ground can be satisfying. The texture and taste of grass offers something different to what they usually eat. You may even notice they prefer grass in certain seasons; perhaps fresh spring grass is a favorite delicacy.”⁵

Potential Health Problems Linked to Grass Eating

As noted earlier, grass-eating is quite common among not only domestic dogs, but wild canines as well. However, since grass is not a primary food source for dogs, I do recommend owners evaluate their pets’ intestinal health and nutritional status, if the behavior becomes obsessive.

As discussed above, grass-eating can be a sign of boredom or a way to pass the time for some dogs; for others, it’s a fun and rewarding behavior. However, in my experience there are also certain health-related reasons dogs eat grass:

- **To relieve gastrointestinal (GI) upset** — Despite the results of the small 2007 study of 12 dogs, dogs with GI upset do indeed consume grass because they instinctively know it will make them throw up. There seems to be something about the texture of grass that triggers vomiting or a bowel movement in many dogs, which relieves their discomfort. If this is the situation with your dog, he’ll probably seem almost frantic to get outside to start gobbling up the nearest patch of grass.

The intensity of grass consumption for the purpose of vomiting is usually strong and the grass chosen appears to be less important. If the “cure” works, at some point he’ll quit chewing, lick his lips (a sign of nausea in dogs), and throw up.

This is normal behavior for canines (who are, by design, scavenging carnivores and indiscriminate eaters) and nothing to be concerned about unless it happens more than once or twice a year. It’s nature’s way of helping dogs get rid of toxins from their bodies and bring their GI tracts back into balance.

Dogs who ingest grass to throw up are usually not selective about what grass they consume; they just want to induce vomiting and feel better. But there are several other reasons that dogs eat grass (and don’t throw up). In fact, many dogs seek out specific grasses and are quite selective about what species they’re looking for. There are several reasons dogs eat grass and don’t throw up, including:

- **To balance the microbiome** — Grass contains prebiotic fiber that may help keep your dog’s intestinal flora balanced and resilient.
- **To eliminate intestinal parasites** — Chimpanzees consume plant material to increase intestinal motility to rid their bodies of intestinal parasites.⁶ It’s possible dogs eat grass for a similar reason.
- **To fulfill specific nutrient requirements** — In a 2008 study, researchers found that grass eating in domestic dogs is a normal tendency.⁷ This might be an inherited behavior, since wild canines eat entire prey animals, including the entrails (guts), which typically contain digested plant matter.

It's possible the grasses your dog likes to munch contain nutrients her body lacks. Grass is an abundant source of fiber. As a living green food, it contains phytonutrients, is high in potassium and chlorophyll, and is also a pretty good source of digestive enzymes. Your dog could be seeking out selective grasses to make up one or more nutrients she's not currently getting in her diet.

If Your Dog Regularly Eats Grass

If your dog's grass eating is chronic and especially if it causes her to vomit frequently, it's time to make an appointment with your veterinarian.

In the meantime, I recommend upgrading her diet if she's still eating kibble or any non-human grade commercial dog food. Most healthy dogs fed a nutritionally optimal, species-specific diet don't routinely consume an abundance of grass because they receive all the nourishment their bodies need from their food, and they rarely suffer from digestive issues.

Adding probiotics and digestive enzymes can also benefit dogs with "sensitive stomachs." If you're sure your dog is receiving optimal nutrition from her diet and her microbiome is healthy, but she still eats a significant amount of grass, consider growing your own sunflower sprouts. **Sprouts** can provide an easy, inexpensive source of fresh, live, organic vegetation and are much more nutritious than grass.

If your dog is selective about the grass she eats, choosing tall, broad grasses to nibble (the kind that typically grow along a fence line or between cracks in the sidewalk) and then moves on, she's most likely eating grass because she wants to or because she's seeking the nutritional or digestive benefits it provides. There's no cause for concern as long as you're sure the grass she's sampling is free of pesticides, herbicides, and other contaminants.

Sources and References

¹ Hart, Benjamin. (2008). Why do dogs and cats eat grass? *Veterinary Medicine*. 103. 648-649

² Stahler, D.H. et al. *The Journal of Nutrition*, Volume 136, Issue 7, 1 July 2006, Pages 1923S-1926S

³ Bjone, S.J. et al. 44-45 Grass eating patterns in the domestic dog, *Canis familiaris*. *Recent Advances in Animal Nutrition in Australia* 16 (2007).

⁴ McKenzie, S.J. et al. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* Volume 123, Issues 1-2, February 2010, Pages 51-55

⁵ *The Conversation*, June 1, 2023

⁶ *International Journal of Primatology*, June 2001; 22(3): 329-346

⁷ *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, Vol. 111, Iss. 1-2, May 1, 2008
