

Don't Let Your Dog Have His Treat if He Does This

Rule number one, and extremely important. It doesn't matter how much it goes against his canine nature. You must toe the line or you'll never stop this bad behavior. Here's how to know you've won this battle — even if it's not a 100% perfect effort.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Treats are great training tools to reinforce positive behavior, however, many dogs must be trained in proper treat-taking behavior
- Dogs who snap, snatch, grab or bite at treats being offered by human fingers need to learn the art of gentle treat-taking
- The first step in teaching your dog treat-taking manners is to show her that never again will snapping at your hand result in a treat
- Even after your dog learns to take treats gently, there will be occasions when she forgets her training – no dog gets it right 100% of the time
- Recommended treats for dogs include small amounts of fresh human foods such as cube meats, as well as certain fruits, nuts, and cheese, and homemade snacks from your own kitchen

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published April 23, 2016.

If you share your life with one or more canine companions, you know that giving your dog a treat can be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, treats are rewards for desired behavior and dogs love them, which is a good thing.

But if your dog tends to rip treats from your hands so enthusiastically that you cry out in fear or pain, it can really put a damper on the treat-giving experience, leaving both you and your furry friend feeling a little confused and upset.

If your dog is a treat-grabbing-finger-nipper, take heart. There are things you can do to successfully curb the behavior. In the meantime, to protect your digits and your nerves, just drop the treat on the floor in front of him.

Alternatively, you can offer soft treats (for example, a bit of organic yogurt or soft cheese) at the end of a spoon.

Three Ground Rules for Training Your Dog on Gentle Treat-Taking

- The first thing you must do to re-train your dog to take treats gently is commit that once training begins, snapping at your hand = no treat. No exceptions!

You'll have very limited success extinguishing your dog's grabby habit if you relent and give him a treat while or immediately after he snaps at your fingers.

- The second thing you'll need to do is set aside time to work on gentle treat-taking in training sessions separate from all others.

When you're offering treats to reinforce another behavior, it's not a good time to try to simultaneously teach treat-taking manners, as it will serve only to confuse your puppy or adult dog.

- The third thing you must do is to refuse to give up in frustration! Most dogs require repeated consistent reinforcement in the art of gentle treat-taking.

It's helpful to remember that not only are you working to replace an undesirable behavior with a better one, but you're also working against your dog's natural canine instinct to grab and gulp food.

Gentle Treat-Taking Training Steps

Chances are your dog has grown accustomed to quite easily snatching treats from your fingertips, or from the floor if you've opted to go that route. What this means is your dog's bad manners have been rewarded, and now you must make the behavior stop working for him.

- Make sure to feed your dog about 30 minutes before treat-taking lessons. A hungry dog will be much less compliant than a dog with a full tummy.
- Get in the habit of offering treats at the level of your dog's face – just under his mouth or at chest level - instead of over his head. Holding a treat over your dog's head encourages him to either stand on his hind legs or jump up to reach it.

This can actually make his snapping more lethal because he has to try to coordinate his line of sight and mouth movements while balancing on two legs or in mid-air.

- Hold a treat in the palm of your hand and close your fist around it. Offer that hand to your dog, but do not open your fist while he's snapping at your fingers. (If you're concerned about being bitten, you might want to wear gloves.)
- Whatever you do, don't open that hand while he's biting at it – wait him out. Once he dials down the snapping and perhaps licks your hand or softly nudges or nibbles at it, say the word "Gentle" or "Easy" and slowly open your fist so he can take the treat.
- Continue offering treats this way, and resist the urge to drop the treat or let him have it while he's snapping at your hand.

You want him to get the message that snapping and using his teeth no longer work, and that a gentle lick, sniff, or nudge is the new behavior he must display to get treats.

Obviously the other goal in this transaction is to have your dog learn to associate the word "Gentle" or "Easy" with proper treat-taking behavior. This means saying the word consistently during each training session and whenever you offer treats in the future. According to Clicker Training Lessons:

"If you continue to say 'Gentle' or 'Easy' while working on this, he will begin to associate that word with the behavior. Then you can start to expect that gentle treat-taking whenever he earns one.

*If he slips up and starts to get rough, say 'Ah ah!' and pull your hand away. Then offer the treat again, reminding him to be 'Gentle'."*¹

Just stay focused on your goal, which is to teach your dog that he won't get a treat unless he takes it gently. When your furry companion occasionally forgets his manners, simply pull your hand back and try again, using the "Gentle" cue to remind him.

For Highly Treat-Motivated or Highly Reactive Dogs

If your dog occasionally doesn't respond to the treat-in-hand method or if she's more reactive in certain situations, the Animal Behavior College offers this alternative for offering treats:²

- scoop a bit of almond butter (make absolutely sure it's xylitol-free, or you can also use coconut oil or organic liver sausage) on a wooden spoon, then stick the treat in the almond butter on the spoon
- Offer the almond butter and treat to your dog while saying "Gentle"
- At the first sign your dog is becoming too aggressive in taking the treat, pull the spoon away (the almond butter will hold the treat on the spoon)
- Repeat the offer using the "Gentle" command until she has calmed enough to take it gently

Keep in mind that no dog gets treat-taking right 100% of the time, especially when she's highly stimulated or there's more than one dog receiving treats simultaneously.

If you're in a situation in which you suspect your dog will temporarily forget her training, or if you're offering treats to an unfamiliar dog, your safest bet is to either drop the treat on the ground, or offer it from the center of your hand with an open palm.

Take Care Not to Treat Your Dog to Too Many Treats

Dog treats, even very healthy ones, should not make up more than 15% of your pet's daily food intake, and ideally less than 10%. Try to limit them to training and behavior rewards, as a bedtime ritual, or as a "time to get in your crate" enticement.

Treats should be offered primarily as rewards during house training, obedience training, or other similar activities, and not because the rest of the family is having a snack. Keep in mind that treats are not a complete form of nutrition for your pet, and should never be used in place of balanced, species-appropriate meals. Again, total treat intake should not constitute more than 15% of your dog's daily calories.

Overfeeding treats on top of daily food intake will result in an obese pet, and overfeeding treats while underfeeding balanced meals will result in nutritional deficiencies.

Recommended Healthy Pet Treats

Ideally, you should always feed your pet treats made with human grade food, preferably from your own kitchen.

- **Fresh Human Foods** — Avoid all grain-based treats. Your dog has no biological requirement for the carbohydrates in these treats, and in addition, they're pro-inflammatory. Instead, offer living foods.

Berries are a great treat because they're small and loaded with antioxidants. **Frozen blueberries** make easy, small training treats. You can also offer small amounts of other fruits (melons and **apples**, for example) as well as cheese. Just be sure to feed quantities that are no more than a 1/8 inch square for a small dog or a 1/4 inch square for bigger dogs.

Excellent training treats include frozen peas and raw almonds, pecans, cashews, and Brazil nuts (but NEVER macadamia nuts).

- **Homemade Treats** — If your dog is crazy for dehydrated chicken strips (chicken jerky), you can make your own quite easily and avoid all those dicey commercial brands. Just buy some boneless chicken breasts, clean them, and slice into long, thin strips – the thinner the better. Place the strips on a greased or non-stick cookie sheet and bake them for at least three hours at 180 degrees.

The low temp dries the chicken out slowly, and the strips wind up nice and chewy. Let the strips cool, and then store them in plastic bags or another airtight container. You can also freeze them. If you buy commercial canned food for your dog, you can repurpose a can for use as a supply of healthy treats.

Open a can of your pet's favorite brand and spoon out little treat sized amounts onto a baking sheet covered with parchment paper. Put the baking sheet into the freezer until the bite-sized bits of food are frozen. Then move them to an airtight container and put them back into the freezer until you're ready to feed them.

Sources and References

¹ [Clicker Lessons](#)

² [Animal Behavior College Blog](#)
