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# WHAT'S HE THINKING?

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*The reasons behind your dog's most interesting habits*

*by the*

**AMERICAN KENNEL CLUB**



Dogs exhibit all sorts of bewildering, funny, sometimes worrisome, quirky behaviors.

Here are some of the most common and mysterious canine habits, and the reasons behind them.



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## WHY DOES MY DOG SPIN IN CIRCLES BEFORE LYING DOWN?

To explain this behavior, we must go back to dogs' roots—to the days when they were born and lived in the wild. Though we cannot know for sure how domestic dogs' ancestors behaved, we can make reasonable assumptions based on observation of the behavior of wild canids today. With respect to the circling you mention, what is seen in nature is that wild dogs walk in circles to flatten the grass before lying down in order to create a safe and comfortable nest. As a survival-necessary behavior, circling before lying down must have become hardwired as a so-called fixed action pattern of behavior, i.e., a behavioral sequence that is genetically encoded and passed on from generation to generation.



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When your dog circles on the living-room floor before taking a nap, he is actually acting out a primordial sequence that has been in his family's genes for many thousands of years. As common a behavior as pre-nap circling is, it is remarkable to think of its origins in the dim and distant past, long before man and dog ever slept under the same roof.



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## WHY DOES MY DOG CHASE HIS TAIL?

Current thinking is that tail-chasing starts as a “vacuum activity” in which a dog with high prey-drive and no natural outlets for predatory behavior spies his tail out of the corner of his eye and attempts to catch it. The result is a circular motion with the dog in hot pursuit of a conveniently placed “prey” that retreats at an equal speed.



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Later, the behavior becomes ingrained and may be performed almost literally at the drop of a hat. Some dogs catch and bite their tails, causing them to bleed. Others spin for hours, stopping only briefly to grab a mouthful of food or to catch a few winks of sleep. At this stage, the anxiety that comes of boredom and inactivity has given rise to a truly compulsive behavior, and one that is resistant to almost any intervention except major lifestyle change or anti-obsessional medication.



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The most common whirling dervishes of the canine population are Bull Terrier and German Shepherds. Some people say that occasional desultory tail-chasing is normal for these breeds, though in fact it is not.

You should consult your veterinarian about this tail-chasing to rule out possible medical causes of circling and then see if there is anything that she might advise by way of treatment.



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## WHY DOES MY DOG STICK HIS HEAD OUT OF THE CAR WINDOW WHEN WE'RE DRIVING?

Dogs like seeing things whizzing by, they like the feel of the wind on their face, and they can smell all sorts of interesting smells associated with the various neighborhoods through which they pass. For a dog, having its head out of the window of a moving car provides a veritable cornucopia of sensory experiences.



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The downside to allowing dogs to revel in this hedonistic pleasure is that they can get injured. Flying pebbles thrown up by passing cars' wheels, and the sheer force of a 60 m.p.h. wind practically peeling back the dog's eyelids, may take their toll. To attenuate this risk, one company has devised goggles ("Doggles") for dogs to wear when they stick their heads out of the window so that their eyes are protected.

In response to your question, the correct-and short-answer is because it's fun. Without the correct supervision and proper precautions, however, the fun may literally end in tears for both dog and owner.



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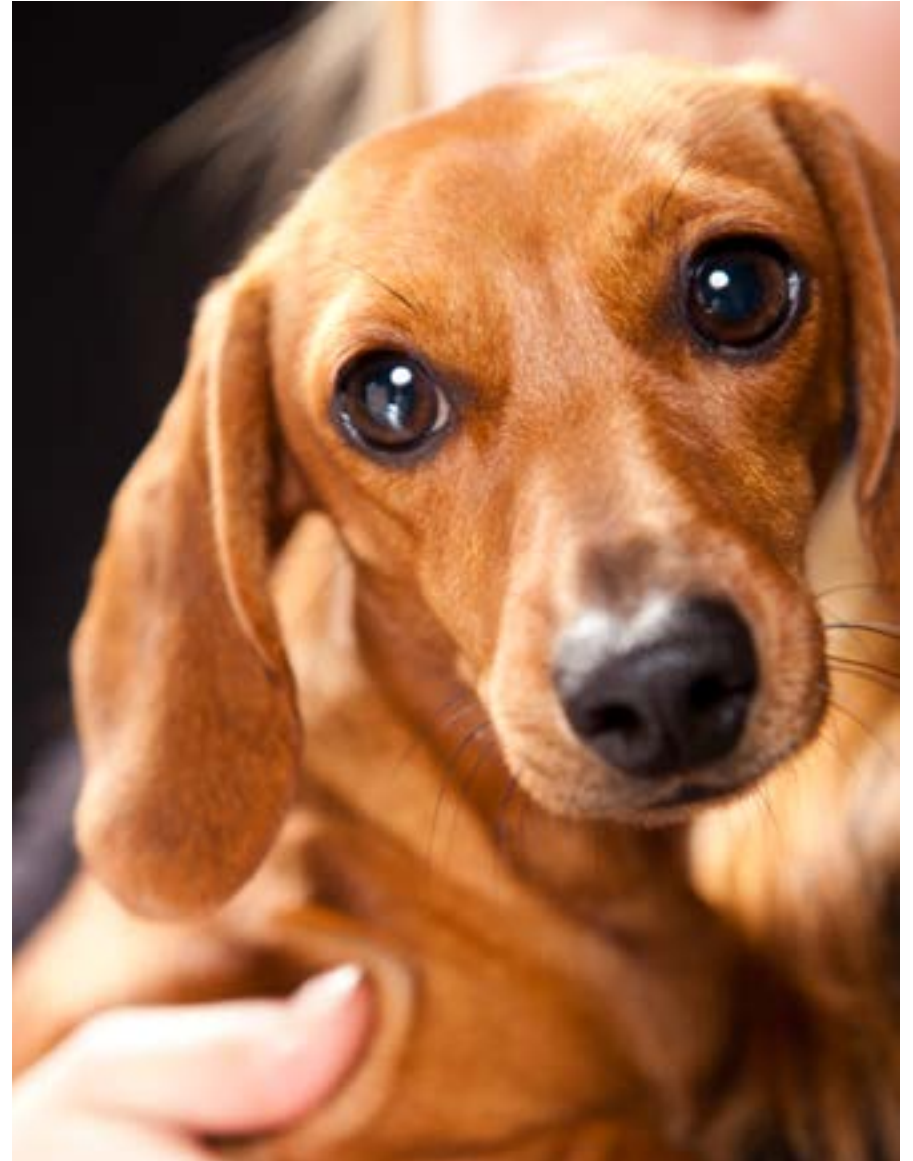
## **WHY DOES MY FEMALE DOG MARK? I THOUGHT ONLY MALE DOGS DID THAT.**

You may be surprised to know marking behavior is not solely in the male province. Females may also engage in this behavior, especially intact bitches in heat. Even spayed females may urine-mark from time to time when they have important territorial messages to convey. So, if you wonder why she is marking, you might want to start by noting the location of the “accidents” and go from there.



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Often, the location gives away the motivation. If she's an intact female, spaying will likely address the problem. If she's already spayed, then anxiety is probably underlying the behavior. If the cause of the anxiety can be addressed, the urine-marking will cease. In some cases, anti-anxiety medication must be employed to help prevent urine-marking in neutered or intact females.



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## WHY DO DOGS LICK OTHER DOGS' MUZZLES?

Wild dog puppies lick their mother's lips when she returns from a hunt, her belly full of predigested meat. This is the signal for her to regurgitate and for the family to share the spoils. Aside from hunger pains, pups engage in this behavior in an excited, servile manner, attempting to curry their mother's favor. The behavioral display reflexively triggers the appropriate visceral response from mom, who proceeds to deliver the goods. The pups' groveling is rewarded and the behavior reinforced.



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Domestic pups engage in this behavior after transitioning to solid food, and with the same result. While there are no doubt reflex connections that complete this biological loop, there are clearly cognitive aspects, too. The pups' behavior is a well-mannered, polite request (saying "pretty please"), and is undoubtedly intended as, and viewed as, a subordinate behavior. It is a care-soliciting behavior that elicits a care-giving response by the mother. An echo of this behavior often persists into adulthood, so that when certain deferent dogs meet a highly esteemed peer,



they will often signal their utter respect in this vestigial, puppyish way.

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### **WHY DO SOME DOGS SUCK ON ITEMS SUCH AS BLANKETS?**

Puppies are born with an instinct to nurse at mother's "milk bar." All things being equal, they are provided with this opportunity and will nurse to their little hearts' content until, at some later stage of development, the female, in her wisdom, begins to rebuff their attempts. Even when the milk supply has virtually dried up, some pups will return to the "well" for an occasional comfort suckle if they become unnerved by surrounding events.

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Dogs provided with such opportunities are unlikely to go on to become blanket suckers; actually, it's the ones who have this biological drive denied who divert their nursing behavior inappropriately. An extreme example of a pup driven to blanket sucking would be an orphan pup bottle-raised by a well-intentioned owner. No matter how hard the human caregiver tries, he cannot provide the same opportunities to nurse as the pup's mom. In moments of unsatisfied need, the pup may turn to nursing on itself, its littermates, or a nearby blanket.



Early-weaned pups are also likely to exhibit displaced nursing behavior in the form of blanket sucking. In addition, some breeds have a greater propensity to nurse or chew on blankets than others, implying a genetic influence on the behavior. Breeds most well known for this behavior are Doberman Pinschers and Dachshunds. Dobermans will nurse on blankets and also on themselves. In the latter instance, the behavior is termed “flank sucking.” Perhaps the breed propensity derives from a more powerful nursing drive that is less easily satisfied and more likely to displace.





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## WHY DOES MY DOG BRING ME A SHOE WHEN HE GREETES ME?

Any behavior has both genetic and learned components. The genetics operating in this case may be those governing willfulness (“dominance,” if you will) and prey drive (modified by us humans to facilitate their prior use for herding cattle). The learning, or nurtural components, in this case could be positive or negative reinforcement.

Let us suppose, for a moment, that your dog is displaying the behavior because of dominance



with negative reinforcement of the behavior. In that case, she would grab the object to prevent people from getting it. The frequency of the behavior would be increased because it avoids a negative consequence—the loss of access to the object in question. In a different scenario, the behavior might be derived as a result of her predatory inclinations and positive reinforcement of the behavior. That is, her natural tendency to grab something in her mouth and hold it there might be reinforced by peoples’ attention. The game goes on as long as she retains the object, and is over the moment she relinquishes it—so she doesn’t.

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We'll have to leave it to you to determine the precise cause of your dog's behavior, but if she shows signs of willfulness or possessiveness at other times, perhaps the dominance explanation fits better. If you regard her as a dog with a strong prey drive, who likes to be the center of attention, maybe the predatory explanation is more correct. You could also argue dominance with positive reinforcement, or predatory motivation with negative reinforcement.



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CURTAILING YOUR DOG'S  
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For more fascinating answers like these,  
check out *Why Does My Dog Do That?*





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### WHO AND WHAT WE ARE:

*The AKC is a not-for-profit organization and the largest purebred dog registry in the world. We are the sports-governing body for over 22,000 dog events a year, including conformation (dog shows) and exciting sports like agility, obedience, rally, tracking, lure coursing, earthdog, herding trials, among others.*



## THE AMERICAN KENNEL CLUB

*But the AKC is so much more! Here are just some of the ways we support and enrich the lives of dogs—purebreds and mixed-breeds alike—and their families. We:*

- Created the [AKC Humane Fund](#), which supports breed rescue activities, assists shelters that permit domestic-abuse victims to bring their pets, and educates dog lovers about responsible dog ownership.
- Offer the [Canine Good Citizen®](#) program: A 10-step test that certifies dogs who have good manners at home and in their community. Over 725,000 dogs across the United States have become Canine Good Citizens, and 42 states have passed resolutions recognizing the program's merit and importance.
- Founded [AKC Reunite](#), which has brought more than 400,000 lost pets back together with their owners.
- Created the [AKC Canine Health Foundation](#), which funds research projects and clinical studies. Since 1995 the AKC has donated over \$24 million to the CHF. (The AKC is the only registry that incorporates health-screening results into its permanent dog records.)
- Conduct thousands of kennel inspections annually to monitor care and conditions at kennels across the country and ensure the integrity of the AKC registry.
- Offer the largest, most comprehensive set of DNA programs for parentage verification and genetic identity to ensure reliable registration records.
- Support one of the world's largest collections of dog-related fine art and artifacts at the [AKC Museum of the Dog](#), and we have the world's largest [dog library](#) at AKC headquarters in New York, both of which are open to the public.



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**THANK YOU FOR READING!**

*We hope this information was valuable to you in helping your puppy live a long, healthy, happy life. Below, find additional books in our Owner's Manual series designed to strengthen the bond between you and your furry family member.*



THE FIVE COMMANDS  
EVERY DOG SHOULD  
KNOW



CRATE TRAINING



PUPPY FOOD  
& NUTRITION



PUPPY  
SOCIALIZATION



WHY DOES MY DOG DO  
THAT?



WHAT'S HE THINKING?



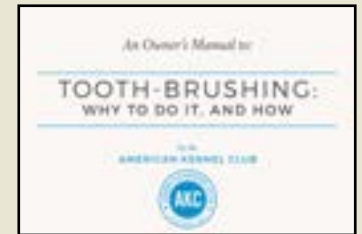
10 ESSENTIAL SKILLS:  
CGC TEST ITEMS



FIVE TRICKS YOU'LL  
WANT TO SHOW OFF



THE ALL-PURPOSE  
GROOMING TOOL KIT



TOOTH-BRUSHING: WHY  
TO DO IT, AND HOW



WHAT TO DO IF YOUR  
PET GOES MISSING



WHAT ARE ALL THESE  
VACCINES?