

Why is My Dog Licking Excessively?



I answered this question recently...

Q: *So, my 11 year old pup is the greatest dog on the planet. However, he has a very difficult habit. He licks the floor.... and the furniture. Not a little bit, a lot. Does anyone else have dogs that do this? He's always done it, and it wasn't bothering me too much. However, It seems to be getting worse. AND, when we travel to other peoples homes, they don't really appreciate it.*

Licking, especially excessive licking, is something I get asked about frequently in class and dog consultations. It's not always as much of a problem as an indicator of one...except for the person getting licked a lot who doesn't like it, as well as loving dog owners who care about helping their pets. There could be many reasons why your dog is doing this. It is always best to consult your veterinarian to rule out any health issues. I am a professional dog trainer, not a veterinarian and I am not giving medical advice, and I also think it's best to work with a Positive Technique Trainer in your area who can get to know you and your dog. They will be able to see the problem first hand and work with you to help your dog.

My two cents worth about dog licking:

Licking is a comforting, repetitive action, which is natural and acts as a pacifier. It is often one of many signs related to stress, which can manifest from lack of exercise both physical and mental, or from being in a stressful or frightening situation, whether it seems that way to you or not, and stresses can be at home or away.

- It is frequently seen in dogs with separation anxiety from being left alone or apart from a specific person.
- Lip licking is a calming signal, telling other dogs they are ok, not a threat, like a sign of peace or signal to relax.
- Puppies may lick at mama's mouth begging for food.
- Dogs lick to clean and groom, both themselves and others.

Licking can also be a sign of affection, which is often called “kissing”. There are many reasons why dogs lick, so I will include the most obvious:

- It’s just a great way to taste something.
- Licking is something to do, especially if there’s nothing else to do, like chewing, running or playing.
- Many dogs lick themselves to sleep, literally ... YouTube is full of cute videos on it.
- Some dogs lick themselves until they develop a sore, or lick granuloma, and continue to lick as it festers, leading to serious medical problems.

It’s always important to look at things from the dog’s perspective, whenever possible. Dogs are dogs, they don’t think like we do, they don’t act like we do and they frequently do odd things just because... Well, because they do.

Could your dog lick the floor at home because he likes to clean up any crumbs, and possibly likes the taste of your floor cleaner (which hopefully is organic and non-toxic)? Yes, he could. My own dog gets very licky after I apply hand lotion. But my first thought about this is that it’s stress related, especially in the context of visiting a friend.

Behaviors become Habits...

Perhaps a behavior learned as a puppy has become a habit, which like chewing, gives the dog an outlet for anxiety or boredom. I don’t mean your dog is neurotic, nor do I mean to make you doubt your wonderful puppy parenting skills. Don’t go there, I am not. Remember, dogs are dogs, they are different from humans. But if your dog habitually licks the floor at home, why not do it at another place? Especially if he feels a little nervous or uncertain, returning to a familiar, comforting, repetitive pattern may be a coping mechanism.

If it were my dog...

1. I would get him fitted for a ThunderShirt at your local pet store, so you can ensure a good, proper fit. You don’t want it too big or too small!
2. I would also start giving him Rescue Remedy (for pets, not the humans version) which is available at most pet stores and vitamin – supplement stores. It is five flower essences, not a pharmaceutical. I give 1-2 drops in each meal, plus 1-2 drops in the water every time I fill it. It helps take the edge off, helping the dog to be more open to change. Flower essences have many beneficial properties, but I will summarize that they are often subtle, and supports the other things you are doing to help the dog.
3. I would start doing some basic positive reinforcement training (I like [clicker training](#), but don’t let the clicker be a hang up, you can do it without as well.) Do a bit of training every day; even the really simple stuff like sit, down, touch nose, touch paw, come, etc. Even if he knows the simple stuff, practice it anyway while adding new behaviors to his resume.

Training builds self confidence

Training gives the dog mental stimulation, promotes thinking and problem solving, and opens communication between you.

I would discover my dogs most beloved food (no chocolate, grapes, raisins, onions or artificial sweeteners) which may be cheese or hot dogs, and I would cut them up into tiny pieces and take them with me to my friend's house. Use a leash to limit the dog from access to licking the floor, and spend time on the floor practicing your training tricks (sit, down, etc.) Yes, at home and at the friends or anywhere else. If your dog is on the floor, but not licking, he gets rewards for NOT licking. Give him lots of exercise and teach him enjoyable alternatives to do rather than lick. I would teach him to wait on a dog mat while chewing a bully stick or other consumable chew, such as a Kong stuffed with nut butters and a meal, a toy to play with, etc. Manage his access to the floor with a leash or gate, so he is only allowed in there when you are watching and can redirect licking to a "good" alternative and be sure to notice any time he would have been licking but does not.... Really reward that good choice!

Remember that habits are developed, they are formed over time and it's going to take time to change the established habit as well.

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