

# Obsessive Compulsive Behavior in Dogs

It's estimated that 2% of dogs suffer from obsessive compulsive behavior, according to the Animal Behavior Clinic at Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine. The specific cause can vary as can the level of intensity. Common drivers are generally conflict and stress. Dogs who have been chained or confined, resulting in social isolation or the dog becoming a vulnerable target, dogs under constant competition for resources or ongoing unpredictability in a chaotic environment may develop obsessive compulsive behavior(s). There is also a strong genetic predisposition for particular breeds (hyper-focused and high-strung) in developing these compulsions.

## What does it look like?

Obsessive compulsive behaviors can include: fly snapping, tail chasing, shadow/light chasing, eating inedible objects (Pica), spinning, flank sucking, incessant licking of self or other dogs/people, non-stop barking, air snapping and more. These behaviors can increase during any periods of stress. It is the stress on the dog (from **his** perspective) that matters. What your dog feels is stressful may not be the same as what you perceive as stressful. Learning what anxiety and stress in dogs looks like is helpful (see *Doggie Language* by Lili Chin).

## What can you do?

First, schedule a vet visit to rule out any underlying medical causes. Once your dog has gotten a clean bill of health there are several actions you can take to mitigate OCD behaviors.

- Learn what your dog's triggers are and work to reduce and eventually eliminate his exposure. Keep his routine predictable from day to day and remove any known stressors.
- Choose an activity that your dog enjoys and start increasing his daily exercise. Not only can exercise lower any anxiety that might be playing a part, but it can release endorphins assisting in relaxation.
- Keep his brain happy and enrich his days by giving him puzzle toys or food-dispensing toys and games.
- Do not use laser pointers to exercise or play with your dog. Frustration can play a role in OCD behaviors and laser pointers, without the satisfaction of ever catching anything, can be extremely frustrating for dogs (and cats).
- Use Adaptil spray (also called Comfort Zone) twice a day on his bed or wherever he likes to relax. Adaptil is a synthetic copy of the pheromone that mother dogs give off when they nurse their pups. Dogs know and remember this "scent" and it has a calming and comforting effect.
- Try a Thundershirt on days that aren't too warm. Thundershirts wrap around a dog's body with a snug fit and can calm them much like swaddling a cranky baby can reduce restlessness.
- If the visual world is a trigger for your dog, try Doggles (sunglasses for dogs) or a calming cap to cut down on the visual stimulation.
- Do not intentionally or inadvertently encourage your dog's obsessive behaviors. It's not funny or cute and definitely not enjoyable for your dog.

- Work on training with your dog for five to ten minutes a day. Teach him behaviors that are incompatible with his OCD behaviors. For example, if he chases his tail or spins, get him outside to play fetch or work on “sit” or “down.” Reward him with praise and a high-value treat for not continuing to spin.
- If you have consistently worked on his obsessive compulsive behavior(s) for two to three months with little or no improvement, it might be time to schedule an appointment with a veterinary animal behaviorist. Two options in Portland:
  - Animal Behavior Clinic: [animalbehaviorclinic.net](http://animalbehaviorclinic.net)
  - Synergy Behavior Solutions: [synergybehavior.com](http://synergybehavior.com)

**Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.**