

How to stop your dog's chewing and biting problem

Courtesy of the Humane Society of the United States.

Sooner or later, many dog lovers return home to find some unexpected damage inflicted on their furniture, shoes or other items by their dog or, more specifically, their dog's teeth. Although dogs make great use of their vision and sense of smell to explore the world, one of their favorite ways to take in new information is to put their mouths to work.

Fortunately, chewing can be directed to appropriate items so your dog isn't destroying things you value or jeopardizing their own safety. Until they've learned what they can and can't chew, however, the best medicine is prevention. By setting your dog up for success, you can avoid having to replace your favorite chair or paying for an expensive visit to the veterinarian when your dog has ingested something dangerous.



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Understand Your Dog

Puppies, like infants and toddlers, explore their world by putting objects in their mouths. And, like babies, they teethe for about six months, which usually creates some discomfort. Chewing not only facilitates teething, but also makes sore gums feel better.

Adult dogs may engage in destructive chewing for any number of reasons, including as a coping strategy for stress and boredom. In order to stop the behavior, you must first determine why your dog is chewing—and remember, they are not doing it to spite you. Possible reasons for destructive chewing include:

- As a puppy, they weren't taught what is and isn't acceptable to chew.
- They don't have access to safe and appropriate chew toys.
- They're bored.
- They suffer from separation anxiety.
- Their behavior is fear-related and chewing is a coping skill.
- Chewing simply feels really good.

If you believe your dog's chewing is related to serious anxiety, you may need to consult a behavior professional for help with both separation anxiety and fear-related behaviors.

Teach what to chew

Take responsibility for your own belongings.

If you don't want it in your dog's mouth, don't make it available. Keep clothing, shoes, books, trash, eyeglasses and remote controls out of your dog's reach. Putting trash in a cupboard or blocking off areas with enticing items is the easiest way to prevent mistakes.

Give your dog toys that are clearly distinguishable from household goods. Don't confuse them by offering shoes and socks as toys and then expecting them to distinguish between their shoe and yours.

Supervise your dog until they are consistently chewing on appropriate items. Keep them with you on their leash in the house so they can't make a mistake out of your sight or only give them access to certain rooms of your home. Choose a "safe place" that's dog-proof and provide fresh water and "safe" toys. If your dog is crate trained, you may also place them in their crate for short periods of time. Remember, crates should never be used for punishment and should be a space where your dog feels safe. Exercise pens and baby gates are also helpful tools.

Give your dog plenty of physical and mental exercise. If your dog is bored, they'll find something to do to amuse themselves. On the other hand, a tired dog is a good dog, so make sure they get lots of physical and mental activity. The amount of exercise should be based on their age, health and breed characteristics. While daily walks and other outdoor time are crucial to their well-being, letting your dog sniff will be more enriching than trying to power walk two miles without stopping. For dogs who enjoy the company of other dogs, a well-run doggy daycare can be an excellent choice for high-energy pups.



Build toys into your daily routine. Instead of bowls, put their food in a puzzle toy or fill a Kong-type toy with their kibble. For more advanced chewers, cover the openings of the puzzle toy with canned cheese or peanut butter and freeze overnight before giving it to them. And be sure to keep a rotation of toys—novel items are way more fun for your dog than chewing on the same toy from last year. Keep some toys hidden and bring them out when you need to keep your dog occupied.

If you catch your dog chewing on something they shouldn't, trade them for a toy that is appropriate. If the item they picked is so much fun they won't give it up, keep high value treats on hand to trade it out. As your dog catches on to this idea, you can add the command "give" as their cue to release the object in exchange for the treat. Removing items from your dog's mouth can cause your dog to develop guarding behaviors or run from you when you need to get an item back.

If your puppy is teething, try freezing a rubber toy; the cold rubber will soothe their gums. As always, supervise your puppy so they don't chew and swallow any pieces.

Make items unpleasant to your dog. Furniture and other items can be coated with a taste deterrent (such as Bitter Apple®) to make them unappealing. Caution: Supervise your dog when you first try one of these deterrents. Some dogs will chew an object even if it's coated with a taste deterrent. Also be aware that you must reapply some of these deterrents to maintain their effectiveness.

Don't chase your dog if they grab an object and run. If you chase them, you are only giving your dog what they want. Being chased by their human is fun! Instead, call them to you and offer them a treat.

Have realistic expectations. At some point your dog will inevitably chew up something you value; this is often part of the transition to a new home. Your dog needs time to learn where and what the appropriate chew toys are. Take precautions and keep things out of their reach to set them up for success.

Punishment doesn't work

There may be times when you're panicked over what your dog is chewing—such as a bottle of medication—which is why training them to trade you for treats will ensure they give up even the most fun items. Scolding or pulling things out of your dog's mouth can cause behavior issues to develop. Why risk your dog's trust when positive reinforcement methods are more effective? And that "guilty look" is actually a canine submissive posture that dogs show when they feel threatened or unsafe. When you're angry and upset, your dog feels threatened by your tone of voice, body language and/or facial expressions, so they may hide or show submissive postures. Building and maintaining a positive, trusting relationship with your dog is the foundation of a happy life together!