

Destructive Chewing: Understanding and Management

Chewing is an instinctual and essential behavior for dogs that serves many roles, from dental hygiene to emotional regulation. While it is a healthy part of being a dog, it becomes "destructive" when directed at items like furniture, shoes, walls, etc.

Key Benefits of Chewing

- **Dental Health:** Chewing helps scrape away plaque and prevents tartar buildup, reducing the risk of gum disease. It also stimulates saliva production, which washes away oral bacteria.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Chewing is a self-soothing activity that releases feel-good hormones like endorphins and dopamine, helping to calm anxious or frustrated dogs.
- **Mental Enrichment:** It provides "brain exercise" to beat boredom and keep dogs mentally sharp.
- **Teething Relief:** For puppies (up to 6-8 months), chewing helps soothe sore gums as adult teeth erupt.
- **Physical Development:** Regular gnawing strengthens jaw muscles and supports healthy jaw bone density.
- **Exploration:** Dogs use their mouths to learn about the texture, taste, and size of objects in their environment.

Why Chewing Becomes "Destructive"

Understanding the *why* is the first step toward a solution. Common causes include:

- **Boredom or Lack of Stimulation:** Bored dogs often invent their own hobbies, and chewing is a popular choice.
- **Separation Anxiety:** This is a serious condition where a dog chews to cope with being alone. Anxiety-driven destruction is often focused on exits like doors, windows, or door frames.
- **Medical Issues:** Dental pain, gastrointestinal discomfort, or conditions that cause extreme hunger (like calorie-restricted diets) can lead to sudden chewing habits.
- **Hunger:** Dogs on restricted diets may chew objects that smell like food in a desperate search for nutrition.
- **Fabric Sucking or Pica:** Some dogs compulsively suck on fabrics or eat non-food items (pica), which may require behavioral or medical intervention.

Prevention and Management Strategies

- **Dog-Proof Your Home:** Remove temptations. Keep shoes, laundry, and anything you don't want your dog to chew out of reach. Use baby gates, exercise pens, or crates to restrict access to "off-limits" areas.
- **Provide Appropriate Outlets:** Offer a variety of textures—rubber toys for tough chewers, dental chews, and puzzle toys. **Rotate toys** every few days to keep them novel and exciting.
- **Teething Relief for Puppies:** Offer frozen wet washcloths or chilled rubber toys to help numb sore gums.
- **Mental & Physical Exercise:** Use daily walks, off-leash play, and training sessions to burn energy. Ditch the food bowl and feed meals through slow-feeders, food puzzles, or snuffle mats to engage their brains.
- **Use Deterrents:** Bitter sprays (like Bitter Apple) can discourage chewing on furniture legs or baseboards. These must be reapplied daily and work best when used alongside training.

Training Tips

- **The "Treat & Trade" Method:** If you catch your dog with an inappropriate item, do not simply grab it from them. Offer a high-value treat in exchange. Once the dog drops the item for the treat, pick up the object and replace it with a toy. This prevents the dog from becoming defensive or "guarding" items they find.
- **Foundational Cues:** Teach your dog **"Leave It"** and **"Drop It"** to manage chewing behavior safely and reliably. Check out these step-by-step tutorials: [How to Train Your Dog to "Leave It"](#), [How to Train Your Dog to "Drop It"](#)
- **Supervise & Redirect:** Watch your dog during all waking hours. If they look at or lick an inappropriate item, interrupt with a neutral sound (like "Oops!") and redirect them to a proper toy, praising them when they take it.

What NOT to Do

- **Never Punish After the Fact:** Dogs cannot connect punishment to an act they did minutes or hours ago. Scolding them when you get home only teaches them to fear your arrival.
- **The "Guilt" Myth:** The "guilty look" (cowering, tucking the tail, whale eye) is actually an appeasement response to your angry tone and body language, not a confession of wrongdoing.

- **Avoid Confusing Hand-Me-Downs:** Do not give your dog old shoes or socks to chew. They cannot distinguish between your "trash" shoes and your brand-new expensive ones.

When to Seek Professional Help

If the chewing is severe, linked to obvious anxiety (panting, pacing, destruction of exits), or if your dog shows aggression when you try to take items away, consult a professional.

Go to <https://www.forcefreeflorida.com/> to find a professional in your area!

Pet Alliance also offers group classes and private training. Our schedule can be found here: [Training at Pet Alliance](#).