

# Understanding normal canine behaviours

## Introduction

It is important to be familiar with what behaviours are normal for our canine patients in order to recognise any abnormal behaviours that may be presented.

It is also important to fully understand why dogs behave in the way they do and this can be as a result of historical influences originating from the origin of the canine species and these instincts continue to shape and influence dog behaviour today.

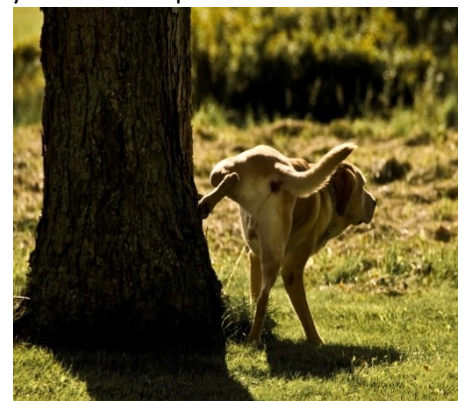
## Eating

- Dogs are omnivores and able to eat and remain healthy with both animal and plant foodstuffs. But the term "opportunivore" may best describe the dog's natural desire to eat whatever is available; from human food scraps to vegetables to dead animals.
- Scavenging for food takes a large portion of a dog's day when free roaming and the act of finding the food, and not just eating it, is rewarding for the dog.
- It is unusual to see obese free roaming dogs but obesity in pet dogs is common as owners tend to overfeed and the pet dog's lifestyle is far more sedentary.



## Toileting

- Dogs are clean animals and, like humans, do not like to toilet where they eat and sleep.
- Both male and female dogs will urinate to mark their territory although the behaviour is more common in unneutered male dogs, or females in season.
- Given the choice, most dogs seem to prefer a little distance between themselves and their owner or other dogs when they toilet and bitches usually choose a grass, sand or soil substrate over a concrete one when urinating.
- During the day, adult pet dogs should be given the opportunity to go out and toilet every 4-6 hours and young puppies much more frequently than this.



## Smelling, hearing and seeing

- The canine sense of smell is their primary sense and they gain more information using their noses than using any other sense.
- The area of the canine brain that is devoted to analysing scent is 40 times greater than that of the human and dogs can identify smells at least 1,000 times better than humans can.
- When a dog sniffs a human it is able to gather information from our scent such as; if we are familiar or a stranger to them, where we've been, what other people or animals we've met and even what are hormone level is.
- A dog may recognise the shape of another dog by visual means, a lot more information can be gathered by sniffing them up close.



- A dog's sense of hearing is second only to his sense of smell in terms of superior ability and is 4 times greater than a human's.
- Dogs are able to hear a wider range of frequencies than humans, the anatomy of the middle and inner ear of a dog and human are very similar.
- The real key to better hearing in dogs is the numerous muscles that control a dog's pinna, or ear flap.
- These muscles allow a dog to finely tune the position of his ear canal to localise a sound, hear it more accurately, and from farther away.
- For this reason, dogs with upright ears, such as terriers, tend to have superior hearing to dogs with floppy ears, such as hounds.
- Loud noises that are tolerated by humans may be frightening or even uncomfortable to dogs and this should be considered when they are in the clinic.
- Ear pinna not only play a huge role in hearing, but also in body language and communication and should never, ever be cut off for cosmetic reasons.



- Whilst a dog's sense of smell and hearing are superior to a human's, its vision is not.
- Dogs have 2 types of colour photoreceptors while a human has 3.
- As a result, dogs probably perceive the world in different saturations of yellow or bluish grey.

## Reproduction

- Dogs generally reach sexual maturity around 6-12 months of age although it is usually later for large breeds.
- The oestrus cycle lasts between 2-4 weeks and a bitch comes into season usually every 6 months.

**Proestrus** is the first stage of the reproductive cycle and is when eggs in the ovaries begin to mature and oestrogen levels begin to rise.

- During this time, male dogs are attracted to non-receptive females.
- Initially, the vulva will swell and there will be small amounts of bloody vaginal discharge along with signs of frequent urination and restlessness.
- Proestrus generally lasts 9 days.

**Oestrus** is the next stage, in which oestrogen levels are high, mature eggs are released from ovaries and the bitch will allow male dogs to mate her.

- It is only during oestrus that copulation will result in pregnancy.
- Proestrus and oestrus can last anywhere from 5 to 21 days and the female will usually have a clear to bloody discharge.

**Dioestrus** is the period following ovulation and/or mating.

- Dioestrus lasts approximately 56 to 58 days in a pregnant female, and 60 to 100 days in a non-pregnant female.
- During both of these periods, progesterone levels are high which may result in non-pregnant females experiencing [pseudo-pregnancy](#) or a phantom pregnancy.
- During this time the female may gain weight, have mammary gland development, produce milk, and exhibit nesting behaviours.

**Anoestrus** is the period of reproductive dormancy.

- The female has no attraction to or from the male.

- Anestrus generally lasts four to five months.

**Pregnancy** typically lasts for 63 days (60-70) with an average litter size of 4-8 puppies.

- The puppies are totally dependent on their mother for warmth, protection, and milk
- They are born with their eyes and ear canals closed and which will normally open after 5-14 days.
  - The mother will feed the puppies with her own milk exclusively until they are able to start trying soft foods at around 4-6 weeks of age.
  - Pet dog puppies will usually be fully weaned and ready to go to new homes by around 8 weeks of age, but free roaming puppies will stay with their mothers for much longer, trying to feed off her for as long as she will tolerate.