

DIRT, ELEPHANT BONES, AND LONELY HEARTS
OR
“MOMMY, WHY ARE THERE PEBBLES IN FLUFFY’S POOP?”

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My 8-year old female Border Collie mix started eating dirt at the neighborhood park. She digs with one foot and then takes mouthfuls of dirt. She is on a premium kibble with great supplements. Is there something lacking in her diet? What should I do?

What you describe sounds like the commonly diagnosed symptom called pica appetite. This condition is literally an eating disorder manifested by a craving for, and the ingestion of non-digestible, non-food items. In dogs and cats it can include dirt, clay, ashes, rocks (large and small), paper, plastic, chalk, sticks, and other non-digestible plant parts such as pine cones. It does not include such things as grass, soaps made with animal fats, and various kinds of animal feces. Eating these things while strange for humans is quite normal if you are an animal.

No one really knows for sure why they eat these things. The collective thought is that they are searching for something that they are missing in their daily diet. This can be true to a point (wild parrots will eat clay to get minerals), but usually diets are sufficient in the necessary nutrients. More than likely there is an increased hunger, and/or a failure to assimilate (digest and absorb) the nutrients that are in the food rather than a lack of something. Pets may normally ingest items that have had some food on them like wrapping paper, plastic bags or aluminum foil, and this is not the pica. Cats are generally a lot more discerning than dogs about what they put into their mouth, chew and swallow. Dogs like their wolf ancestors will frequently eat various types of feces. The reason for this disgusting habit is that there are still undigested nutrients in that “stuff” and they find that attractive for some reason. Items that are favored are rabbit droppings, horse road apples, and what dog do you know who is not fond of kitty roca from the litter pan? This too is not pica and is normal behavior. Puppies and kittens to a lesser extent will put almost anything in their mouth, chew on and swallow it, not unlike a human child. This is also normal. If someone has put some type of food on the soil or gravel a dog may lick or eat this trying to fulfill their hunger. Dr. Doug has treated many dogs that filled up on driveway gravel including his own dog Arnold. In each case the gravel was coated with bacon grease from the kitchen that someone had poured out there not thinking it would cause the swallowing of the rocks. In Arnold’s case he had swallowed over 70 one to two-inch sharp rocks, and he only weighed 10 pounds. This could be termed pica but Dr. Doug calls it insanity!

Since the Border Collie dog in the question is not eating dirt or stones all the time, has a good diet, and only eats dirt at the local park Dr. Doug thinks there is something on the soil in these places that is attracting the pet to do this. It could be food spilled there, or

another animal's urine. This can also be an attractant to some dogs. The behavior is definitely pica-like.

So what can you do? See your veterinarian for a full physical exam, and an internal parasite (worm) checkup. They will ask you for a stool sample to analyze for the presence of parasites which will rob the pet of necessary nutrients. Being wormy definitely can cause pica. A blood test may be recommended to check for things such as red blood cell anemia which will make a pet crave things to try to improve the state of being low on the oxygen carrying red blood cells. The state of being pregnant will definitely cause pica to try to feed the demand from the new growing pups or kittens. Finally, assimilation problems with resulting pica appetites are best treated by homeopathy. This is a true constitutional imbalance and can be remedied with well chosen homeopathic medicines.