



Connecticut Humane Society
701 Russell Road
Newington, CT 06111
800-452-0114

Food-related Aggression/Food-guarding

What is it?

Dogs with food-related aggression, also known as food-guarding, react inappropriately when approached when eating. They will often display aggressive behavior when a person reaches for their dog food, human food that has fallen on the floor, or a bone or biscuit.

What are the signs?

Dogs with this type of aggression may stiffen, curl their lips, snarl, growl, lunge and/or try to bite if they think a person may take away a valued food item. Generally, the higher the "value" or quality of food, the more pronounced the aggression. This type of aggression only includes the guarding of edible items; the guarding of non-edible items may suggest a different type of canine aggression.

What are the causes?

Before they were man's best friend, dogs were wild animals and guarding possessions from humans or other animals was essential for survival. Wild animals that successfully protect their valuable resources, like food, mates and territory, are more likely to survive than those who don't. Despite a history of this behavior, the domestication of dogs has made this behavior inappropriate and potentially unsafe, especially when this behavior is directed toward humans.

How is it diagnosed?

Food-related aggression can be diagnosed by a licensed veterinary behaviorist, a certified behavior consultant, or a certified applied animal behaviorist. These professionals will ask many questions about the specific problem behaviors and conduct thorough evaluations to determine the proper diagnosis.

What is the treatment?

Typically, dogs that exhibit food-related aggression are placed into a "desensitization" program to teach them that people approaching their food is a good thing. Animals at CHS with food-guarding are hand fed by our trained professionals so they learn a hand or person approaching their food does not warrant guarding behavior, but instead means they will receive a tasty treat. This causes the dog to reduce their guarding behavior and instead be happy when someone reaches for their bowl, as they are anticipating a food reward. These dogs are also taught obedience and basic manners during their stay at the shelter.

What should I do at home?

Dogs with a history of this behavior require a lifelong commitment to positive reinforcement training and management. A trained Connecticut Humane Society professional will demonstrate our hand feeding program, which you will continue at home for at least two weeks. We will also review tips for decreasing the likelihood of a recurrence of food guarding. Furthermore, regularly practicing the dog's learned obedience commands and providing them with food dispensing toys for mental stimulation will be beneficial.

What should I watch for in the future?

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