

If there's one behavior that never fails to turn a pet parent's face beet red, it's mounting. When we see our precious, perfect pup get a determined look in their eye and mount their pal (or yours), it's tempting to reprimand him and pry him off. This is due to a very common misconception; we tend to interpret our dog's mounting behavior as sexually inappropriate - an act that should be talked about in hushed tones. However, with a better understanding of why our dogs mount, combined with a little patience, we can learn how to productively curb this behavior in a positive way. It is important to keep in mind that just because mounting is a behavior we want to discourage, that does not mean your dog is doing anything wrong or inappropriate.

Mounting is an acceptable form of communication when the intensity level and context are appropriate. Mounting and humping behaviors have been observed as early as 3 weeks of age, and are exhibited by both males and females. Brief moments of mounting between dogs can be a normal component of play; for example, two dogs might take turns mounting each other in an innocuous demonstration of excitement. However, many dogs strongly dislike being mounted. As play can escalate quickly in a daycare playgroup, we discourage and attempt to prevent even mild forms of mounting in the interest of avoiding any potential conflict.

While mounting *can* be sexual in nature, sexual expression and courtship are not the typical motivations behind frequent mounting or humping. Let's dive a little deeper into some of the more common reasons we see dogs turn to mounting either at home or in group play:

1. **High arousal or excitement.** Mounting is sometimes the result of over-stimulation. A dog may hump when its owner returns, when a visitor arrives, or when something else causes excitement (e.g., group play). Dogs who are less than optimally socialized tend to become overstimulated easily, and may not have learned what other dogs consider socially appropriate; these dogs may also ignore corrections from their peers. Being involved in rowdy play can also cause dogs to lose control and start mounting and humping.
2. **Stress.** Sometimes, surges of emotion can lead to mounting. In this case, the mounting behavior is used out of its normal context as an attempt to cope with whatever is causing the dog stress or anxiety. The mounting offers a release of emotion.
3. **Boredom.** Just as mounting can be an outlet for overstimulation, the opposite can also be true. We all use coping mechanisms to deal with understimulation. Humans sometimes flip on the TV when we're bored; some dogs develop the habit of mounting during downtime.
4. **Medical issues.** Occasionally, mounting or humping is a sign of a medical problem, such as an infection or irritation (e.g., a urinary tract infection). In male dogs, it can indicate a prostate problem. These dogs will also often lick their genitals and appear uncomfortable.

5. **Attention.** Mounting very commonly occurs during play as an attention-getter. Furthermore, dogs learn that their humans laugh or shout when they hump another dog or object. This can reinforce the behavior and make dogs more likely to repeat it. Similarly, it can be a form of acting out.
6. **Pleasure-seeking behavior.** In certain cases, humping can be sexual or pleasure-seeking in nature. The likelihood of a dog humping for pleasure is greater in younger dogs, especially those who have not been spayed/neutered. Pleasure-seeking is rarely the cause of mounting in mature dogs.
7. **Status?** Many people assume that a dog who mounts is asserting dominance over another dog, person, or object. However, mounting, in and of itself, does not indicate a status play. The opposite is much more common - an anxious dog is much more likely to mount than a dog who is socially stable.

It's important to know the underlying emotional state that may be causing the mounting in order to determine which solutions and management techniques will provide our dogs with better ways to express themselves. If mounting is a symptom, simply preventing our dogs from doing it will not address the underlying cause to improve their well being. For example, if Fido is mounting because he is stressed, determining the cause of his anxiety, and subsequently ways of alleviating it, may render him less likely to use mounting as a coping mechanism. We want to emphasize that we *do not* promote corrective or aversive techniques when working through any behavioral issues with our dogs; such approaches will make them more anxious and could even increase the mounting behaviors! Here are three factors to consider in order to best address the mounting:

1. If a medical reason is suspected, a veterinary examination is the best initial course of action. If your dog is licking or chewing at their body or showing other signs of distress, the mounting may be indicative of a medical issue.
2. Assess your dog's lifestyle. Is he sufficiently exercised? Is he bored or understimulated? Are there stressors in his environment he may be responding to? For example, some dogs may be easily overwhelmed by visitors; some are overstimulated by other dogs; some are noise sensitive. All of these circumstances could be the underlying cause of a dog's mounting and humping behaviors. Finding ways to alter the environment may subsequently reduce the dog's desire to mount.
3. If it has become a compulsive behavior, your dog may hump for a large portion of the day, which affects his quality of life and general well-being. In this case, consulting a qualified behavior consultant or veterinary behaviorist is recommended.

Once we've ruled out medical or environmental causes, we can address ways to manage the behavior. Here are some of the techniques that we use in daycare, which can similarly be used to address mounting at home.

1. **Body Blocking.** In group play this is our first line of defense, and it can be yours, too! When your dog approaches another dog or object with obvious posture/intent to mount, calmly step in front of him to block him (without contact). Because your dog wants to respect your bubble, your being there will make the mounting behavior harder to do. This works best with a younger dog or with dogs who are just starting to engage in mounting behaviors.
2. **Redirection.** When our dog is engaging in an undesired behavior, we can interrupt or distract him when the trigger occurs and turn his interest to something else. This helps him reduce practicing the mounting behavior, which decreases the likelihood the mounting will occur in the future, while simultaneously allowing for positive reinforcement - the dog enjoys the new activity (for example, a favorite toy or game) as much or more than he enjoys mounting.
3. **Ask for incompatible behaviors.** When we see that our dog may be getting ready to mount, we can ask him to do a different behavior - for example, to sit, lie down, or to go get a toy - and reward him for it. This is helpful for two reasons: 1) if the dog is sitting or lying down, it is harder to mount (he can't do both at once) and 2) it gives him a pattern of an activity to employ when the urge to mount arises. Rewarding after the dog makes a different choice helps the dog learn that by doing the desired behavior instead of the undesired behavior (i.e., mounting), they get a much better response from us (e.g., praise, treats, etc.).
4. **Minimize opportunities by managing the environment.** If redirection is not working, you can take away the dog's opportunity to mount. The goal is to set our dogs up for success. If your dog persistently mounts visitors when they enter your home, simply remove your dog before the visitor arrives and put him in a safe space (e.g., his crate) until your visitor leaves. You could also put him on a leash (we call this **tethering** in a group play environment). At daycare, if one dog likes to mount other dogs who enter the group, we may put him in a crate before the new dogs come in to allow his initial excitement to pass.
5. **Cool down.** With mature dogs and puppies alike, the use of short time away from the current environment can help our dogs learn that mounting is not a rewarding behavior. The best way to give a cool down is to gently lead your dog to a crate or quiet area using a neutral demeanor (i.e., not yelling or sounding angry). The goal is simply to help them make a different choice. After his arousal level has decreased (typically 1-3 minutes), release him to resume normal activity. This will help your dog learn that opportunities to mount will not last long. And remember, consistency is key!

The upshot is this - mounting and humping, while undesired behaviors, are not bad ones. When we're trying to figure out why an undesired behavior like excessive mounting or humping is occurring, we're better served by observing our dogs to understand the roots of the behavior than by believing the myths we tell ourselves about it. There is no single explanation for mounting or humping, but both are *normal* behavior patterns. At the end of

the day, we know one thing for sure: dogs hump because they can. We can giggle, be embarrassed, or pretend it's not happening, but that will not allow us to better understand our dogs' needs or how we can replace the mounting with behaviors that are more desired.