

# Getting Over the Hump

## PUTTING AN END TO CANINE MOUNTING

What could be more nerve-racking than fixing dinner for your new boss and her husband? You put tons of effort into making sure that everything is just perfect. But no sooner have you hung up their coats than your adolescent sheep dog, Hughie, grasps Mrs. Boss's thigh in his forelegs and ardently "welcomes" her to your home. After praying the floor will open up and swallow you whole, you vow to put an end to your pooch's embarrassing mounting behavior before another guest gets the big "Hughie Welcome."

Rest assured, mounting behavior (grasping with the forelegs and thrusting the pelvis) is normal—and treatable—behavior. It's often seen in littermates of either sex as early as four weeks of age. At this stage, the puppies are practicing adult behaviors in play that they will need for survival of the species later on. The intensity and frequency of this behavior typically peaks in adolescent dogs. In fact, excessive mounting is a normal occurrence in puberty-aged males of many species.

### Why Me? Why Now?

There are several reasons why dogs engage in mounting behavior beyond the need for procreation. Usually, an unneutered male dog will mount another male dog as a display of social dominance—in other words, as a way of letting the other dog know who's boss. While not as frequent, a female dog may mount for the same reason. Less commonly, a male might mount another male because his target has been "feminized" as a result of testicular cancer or through the use of certain drugs. Not surprisingly, the smell of a female dog in heat can instigate a frenzy of mounting behaviors. Even other females who aren't in heat will mount those who are. Males will mount males who have just been with estrus females if they still bear their scent. Estrus females may mount unwilling or inexperienced males. And males who catch wind of the estrus odor may mount the first thing (or unlucky person) they come in contact with. Interestingly enough, cats are sometimes the surprised—and unhappy—recipients of canine ardor.

Some dogs mount when they're excited or overstimulated. Too much petting or grooming, or the arrival of guests, can trigger the behavior—especially in young

unneutered males—and serves as a release for pent-up energy or anxiety. If the excited dog can't find an animate partner, he may seize on a fluffy slipper, wadded-up blanket, throw pillow, or plush toy.

### Now Stop That!

Since mounting is most common in intact dogs, the first step is to spay or neuter the animal. Studies show that one-third of male dogs experience a rapid decline in mounting and another one-third experience a gradual decline in mounting after being neutered. And since females commonly mount during estrus, spaying helps eliminate the behavior.

For the dog who gets too easily aroused, limit petting and grooming sessions to a level he can tolerate. If it's a problem of pent-up energy, increase the intensity of your dog's exercise regimen. If it's the excitement of visitors that sends your dog over the edge, as it did with Hughie, confine him during arrivals and bring him out after things have settled down a bit. Better yet, teach him a rock-solid sit and stay, and reward him with a high-value treat when he complies. After all, one can't mount and sit at the same time (we hope).

There's one last issue of canine mounting that is often overlooked in behavior literature: What do you do with a dog who mounts humans with every ounce of his being, sinking his claws into human flesh and growling at any attempt to remove him? This behavior is a form of dog-to-human dominance aggression that belongs in a different category than the goofy adolescent humping-anything-that-moves behavior. If your dog or a potential shelter adoptee tries this, neuter him first and then seek the help of a certified applied animal behaviorist. This is one time that mounting behavior is more than just a social embarrassment.

**Resource:** *Canine Behavior: A Guide for Veterinarians* by Bonnie V. Beaver, D.V.M.

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