

Frequently Asked Questions about Pet Waste



- How much waste is out there?
- How much bacteria does animal waste contain?
- Is pet waste dangerous?
- How long do piles take to decompose?
- How do you know the water quality issues are caused by pets and not something else?
- Can't I leave it on the grass as fertilizer?
- Are Canada Geese a problem?
- What other sources of bacteria are out there?
- What do I do with the waste after I collect it?

How much waste is out there?

- There are over 53 million dogs in the United States, which would produce 6.3 billion pounds of waste per year. It would take a scoop the size of a football field and 800 feet tall (nearly as tall as the Chrysler Building in New York City!) to dispose of that waste.
- The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that 2 days worth of dog waste from about 100 dogs would contribute enough pollution to close a beach, and all watershed areas within 20 miles of it.
- In the United States, it is estimated that 47% of households own at least one dog, and some own more. The Food and Drug Administration estimates that a dog excretes 0.75 pounds of waste per day. That could equate to over 400 pounds of pet waste per year per household!

How much bacteria does pet waste contain?

Fecal coliform bacteria are bacteria that are common to the intestinal tracts of humans and animals. These bacteria can enter water bodies from human and animal waste and may cause illness and disease if they do. One gram of dog waste (the weight of a business card) contains 23 million fecal coliform bacteria (van der Wel, 1995), almost twice as much as human waste. Keep in mind that the average dog excretes 0.75 pounds of waste per day (340 grams). That equates to 7.82 billion fecal coliform bacteria per day!

Is pet waste dangerous?

Yes! Pet wastes can transmit bacteria and viruses including tapeworm, roundworm, *E. Coli*, Parvo, and more. Humans who come into contact with dog waste could contract campylobacteriosis, salmonellosis, and toxocarisis, which may cause abdominal cramps, fever, coughing or wheezing, hives, and possibly permanent vision damage. Animal waste can also attract mice and parasites that can get into your house or harm your pets and other animals. Pick up animal waste to keep your family healthy.

How long do piles take to decompose?

Dog waste piles can take a year or more to fully break down, depending on climate, the animal's diet, and other factors.

How do you know the water quality issues are caused by pets and not something else?

In 1993, the US EPA reported that 95% of fecal coliform found in urban storm water was of non-human origin (Alderiso et al., 1996 and Trial et al., 1993). In addition, studies in Seattle, Washington, found that nearly 20% of the bacteria isolates researchers could match with a host animal were matched with dogs.

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Wildlife, like deer and coyotes, don't need picked up after because they are spread out over the land and not concentrated in certain areas like our pets. An exception, however, are Canada Geese, a species of wildlife that actually *are* a problem. (You can discourage Canada Geese by not feeding them and by planting native vegetation around your property.) The average household owns four dogs and/or cats. How many households are in your neighborhood? That equates to a lot of animals (and a lot of droppings) in a little space.

There are still other sources we should be concerned about, including combined sewer overflows (CSOs), hobby pets, and farming. Read on for more information about bacteria and sources.

Can't I leave it on the grass as a fertilizer?

No, pet waste will often turn grass yellow or kill it. Besides, the chances of the waste decomposing and being absorbed by your lawn or other plants before the rain water washes it into the nearest stream or reservoir are slim.

Are Canada Geese a problem?

Geese and other waterfowl present in large numbers contribute a heavy load of waste to our water. Help reduce their impacts by not feeding them or otherwise attracting them to your yard. Besides being an environmental benefit, this action is healthier for the birds as well; the bread people typically feed them lacks in the nutrients and roughage they need in their diets.

What other sources of bacteria are out there?

- **Canada Geese:** Geese and other waterfowl present in large numbers contribute a heavy load of waste to our water. Help reduce their impacts by not feeding them or otherwise attracting them to your yard. Besides being an environmental benefit, this action is healthier for the birds as well; the bread people typically feed them lacks in the nutrients and roughage they need in their diets.
- **Combined Sewer Overflows:** Many cities and towns have combined sewer systems. This means that storm water (the water that runs off of your roof, sidewalk, streets, etc. during a storm) and wastewater from homes and businesses end up in the same sewer system. Normally, that water gets treated by a wastewater treatment plant, but in times of very heavy rain, the plant cannot keep up. In these instances, *untreated water* is released into our streams and rivers. Keep water on your property by using rain barrels or rain gardens, and you can lessen the load on the wastewater treatment plants.
- **Unmaintained Septic Systems:** Septic systems are small wastewater treatment systems installed for individual homes. If they are not inspected and maintained properly, they can leak waste and contaminated runoff into our waterways. Visit the Clear Choices, Clean Water Septics page for more information.
- **Livestock or Hobby Pets:** Large livestock operations must have permits and are regulated to ensure they properly dispose of the waste they create. However, smaller backyard farming operations and hobby pets are often overlooked. Their waste should also be properly managed to prevent it from contaminating our water. Collect and pile manure and keep it under cover sheltered from rain and wind, direct downspouts and runoff away from these piles, and/or build a compost system or have an off-site compost facility collect the manure.

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- *Manure Spread Incorrectly on Fields:* Know what amount of manure is needed for your crops and only apply that much! Do not spread in winter or early spring, on sloped lands, near wetlands or water sources, or in other situations where runoff potential is high.

What do I do with the waste after I collect it?

There are a number of things that you can do with the waste after you collect it.

- One simple thing to do is bag it and throw it in the trash. You can use a plastic baggie (old bread bags work nicely) turned inside out over your hand to pick up the waste, then turn the bag right-side out, tie it up, and throw it in the trash.
- You could also flush pet waste down the toilet, but if your home is on a septic system, think twice. Talk with the manufacturer and make sure your septic can handle the extra load.
- Another option is to install an underground pet waste digester that works much the same as a septic system. These affordable, easy-to-install tools enable you to dispose of the pet waste without ever having to bring it inside your home.
- Lastly, you could choose to bury your pet's droppings. Bury the waste in several different locations around your yard (never near vegetable gardens) in holes 12 inches deep. Be sure to cover the waste with at least 8 inches of soil.

References:

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