



Abnormal behaviours in greyhounds

FACT SHEET



Introduction

Stereotypies and abnormal behaviours are behaviours that are:

- not normally seen in behaviourally healthy greyhounds; or
- normal behaviours but are repeated excessively; and/or
- normal behaviours that are being performed when they normally would not be.

Common examples include pacing, excessive barking, bopping, licking, panting or destructive chewing behaviour.



Abnormal behaviours indicate that there is, or was, a problem with a greyhound's environment at some time.

Abnormal behaviour is a coping mechanism

Some of the common reasons for the development of abnormal behaviours include:

- **boredom** resulting from a lack of company, insufficient exercise and/or mental stimulation;
- prolonged **anxiety or excitement**; resulting in behaviours such as **hypervigilance** (constantly watching and waiting for something to happen);
- repeated or prolonged **fear**;
- a **medical condition**;
- an ongoing/repeated **physical** reason such as heat, cold, hunger or thirst; and
- **frustration** created by a lack of opportunity to engage in normal, healthy behaviour.

It is important to NOT suppress this coping behaviour (for example, by using a barking muzzles on an anxious, isolated or frustrated dog) as this will make the stress worse.

Some common abnormal behaviours in greyhounds

The following is a list of the most common stereotypies in greyhounds. Many people experienced with greyhounds may not recognise these behaviours as abnormal.

- **Repetitive** behaviours such as:
 - lip smacking and licking;
 - excessive licking in general (of themselves or their environment);
 - excessive drinking or playing with water;
 - bopping;
 - pacing, circling and/or spinning (a sign of this may be worn pads on their feet); and
 - weaving.
- **Destructive** behaviours such as:
 - chewing wire, beds, bedding, bowls etc; and
 - persistent barking or howling.

Why are abnormal behaviours a problem?

Abnormal behaviours usually develop when the greyhound is feeling stressed over an extended period of time, a condition known as **chronic stress**. For example, when a greyhound is bored, anxious or frustrated for several weeks or months, their natural instinct is to look for a way to reduce the stress.

Abnormal behaviours are **coping mechanisms**. They allow the greyhound some relief from how it is feeling, and to adapt and cope with their environment. Yet, these behaviours use important energy and will impact on the greyhound's ability to learn, race and enjoy life. Stress can also have some longer-term implications in terms of injury (for example, self-licking, pacing, and bopping), and infection (by suppressing the immune system).

The most common reason for the development of abnormal behaviours is when a greyhound's environment does not allow it to express normal behaviour, or where there is too much or not enough mental stimulation. If you can identify the development of an abnormal behaviour when it is just beginning, you can take steps to 'fix' the greyhound's environment. However, once an abnormal behaviour has developed, you need to 'fix' the environment *and* retrain the greyhound.



Managing abnormal behaviours

The first step in managing these types of behaviours is to identify them early. The people who feed and care for greyhounds every day are the best placed to identify abnormal behaviours. Carers become familiar with each greyhound, its behaviour and reactions to different things, such as eating habits. Carers will often be the first to notice something is not quite right.

As with any change in behaviour, the first step is to check if the greyhound is **ill or injured**. If there are no signs of illness or injury, the next step is to examine the greyhound's **routine** and **environment**.

It is important to take into consideration:

- how long a greyhound has had its routine:
- whether the routine varies often:
- whether the routine has recently changed; and
- what enrichment, exercise and social activities the greyhound receives.

It is good to record:

- what the abnormal behaviour is;
- when it happens; and
- how long it happens for.

The **checklist on the following page** might be useful in identifying the causes of abnormal behaviours and finding a solution.

As a rule of thumb, regular, small variations to routine and environment are most useful in reducing boredom. These changes can include:

- changes to food type (e.g. bones);
- regular opportunities to leave the kennel and experience different environments (e.g. walks, trips to the track or trialling etc);
- meeting new people; and
- spending time with different, compatible, dogs.

However, for some dogs, big changes (new kennel location and new carers), or major disruptions to routines can cause stress and trigger the development of abnormal behaviours.

Try to identify why the abnormal behaviour may have started and when it happens.

In some cases, the development of the behaviour may have been gradual, happening over a long period of time due to environmental stress.



Once you understand why a greyhound has developed or is developing an abnormal behaviour, you can consider appropriate training, exercise and environmental enrichment strategies; as well as possible infrastructure or husbandry solutions.

Greyhound Details

Greyhound Name: _____ Ear Brand: _____

Kennel Location: _____

Behaviour Checklist

Abnormal behaviour (describe): _____

Times of day behaviour seen: _____

Duration (length of time greyhound displays behaviour): _____

How long has the greyhound been on the property? _____

How long has the greyhound been in that kennel? _____

How often does the greyhound train? _____

How long is the greyhound in kennels during day? _____

How long does greyhound spend in day yards/exercise runs/enrichment yards each day? _____

Are enrichment items provided in kennel? Y/N If yes, describe: (including how frequently items are changed)

Recent changes to routine? Y/N If yes, describe:

Recent changes to diet? Y/N If yes, describe:

Recent changes to carers? Y/N If yes, describe:

How often is greyhound taken off property? _____

How often does greyhound meet new dogs? _____

How often does greyhound meet new people? _____

If this is a new behaviour you are observing, finding a solution to reduce the stress will hopefully stop the behaviour quickly, before it becomes a habit. However, if the behaviour developed at some other time, and you are not sure why, your efforts to retrain the behaviour must focus on when and where your greyhound shows the behaviour and for how long.

In these cases, it is important to find ways to interrupt the behaviour by offering relief or distraction before it begins and/or offering alternatives as soon as it begins. Table 1 below provides some enrichment ideas that you might find useful.



If in doubt, seek help from GAP staff, who can provide support over the phone, or contact your veterinarian or a professional dog trainer.



Table 1. Environmental enrichment ideas

<p>Change kennel routines or design</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work each day to change something within the normal kennel routine. This will provide mental stimulation for all the greyhounds and will also prevent some of the learned triggers that are often associated with abnormal behaviours.
<p>Social and physical enrichment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide multiple enrichment items that are regularly rotated to reduce or avoid boredom. Food-based enrichments, long-lasting chews, and toys that encourage interaction usually work best for in-kennel enrichment. • Provide plenty of exercise daily. • Place the greyhounds in external yards with plenty of enrichment options such as ramps, toys, pools of water, etc. • Make sure there is plenty of water and shelter, access to different areas, hard and soft resting surfaces, areas which block visual access to other greyhounds and quiet spots. • Consider using a pressure jacket (thunder shirts or thunder jackets) at times when a greyhound appears fearful or anxious about a situation or activity. • Regularly provide your greyhound with opportunities to socialise with other friendly and compatible dogs.
<p>Husbandry and routines</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the amount of time spent brushing, bathing or handling greyhounds per week. • Regularly handle and expose greyhounds to a people other than their usual handlers. • Implement a 'quiet kennels' training program, where all greyhounds are rewarded for quiet behaviour throughout daily activities. This type of training can also be used for specific dogs by hanging a container of treats on the front of their kennel and having all handlers in the kennel reward the greyhound every time they go past and the greyhound is quiet. • Modify sounds and smells around kennel environment, for example play a radio during the day to provide variety. Be careful to also provide designated quiet times when outside sounds are minimised. Lunchtime is an excellent opportunity to provide 1-2 hours of quiet time during which all greyhounds are given chew-based enrichments and all activities within the kennel are stopped.