



Dog doesn't want your treats?

Some of you might have been following the training so far and still struggle to find high value treats that your dog will train for, especially once he has to sniff them in some higher grass or in the presence of a trigger.

Let's talk a little bit about why your dog might still refuse treats.

In any situation in which we offer food to our dogs, several factors will decide whether they will eat it - or not.

Of course, there is the value of the treat. The higher value the treat is, the more likely your dog is to eat them. As mentioned in our lesson on treats: The dog treats you can buy at the supermarket or chain stores are often not ideal. They contain a lot of fillers to make them shelf-stable and will not appeal to all dogs.

If you have not yet done so, I really want to encourage you to try out treats with a very high meat content, such as chicken, freeze-dried liver, small pieces of steak or hotdogs. Upping the value of the treat is usually the fastest way to make your dog eat.

But - there are more factors.

Another one is whether your dog actually has an appetite or not. The most delicious treat might not do anything for a dog who has a full stomach and no use for food. That's why you should not plan training sessions right after your dog has eaten. If you for example feed your dog breakfast at 8am and then want to go train at 8:30am - he should not have his full breakfast. Otherwise he may just not have any use for your treats, no matter how good they are.

This also means that free-feeding your dog should be stopped while you are working on the reactivity. Dogs that are free-fed usually graze throughout the day. They might come to their bowl and just eat a few pieces of kibble and then walk away again ... While it is great when a dog can maintain a healthy weight like this, it will make training with treats a lot harder.

Because if your dog can satiate himself at any time during the day, how do you know he has not done so just before heading out to training? If your dog grazes enough during the day to never really feel a lot of appetite, even the best treats might not be enticing to him.



I recommend switching to feeding 2 times a day, and picking up the bowl after 10 minutes instead of free-feeding. This way your dog still gets plenty of time to eat, but we also get a longer stretch of time when he does not eat and we can time our training accordingly.

Related to this is another factor - funny enough, overweight dogs tend to not be as food-driven as normal weight dogs. This might seem unintuitive - we would think that the overweight dogs are too heavy because they LIKE food a lot. But in fact, it is usually a reflection of how the dog is being fed too much, and is likely more full at any given time, and less likely to work hard for a treat.

A lot of dog breeds, especially food-crazy ones like Labradors, Beagles, Aussies - will always seem somewhat hungry. It is really important to not think that you have to feed your dog until he is not showing any interest in food anymore. He will eat way too much and become too heavy.

This is not an audio segment about healthy weight but I really want to add this because there are a lot of misconceptions about what a good weight for dogs is. In a healthy-weight dog you should be able to run your fingers across his sides and feel the ribs without having to push in hard.

If the ribs are under half an inch of fat or you cannot feel them at all, your dog really should eat less. And chances are that once he is slimming down, his food drive will increase. So, if you have been struggling to get your dog interested in treats, and you also now know that he is too heavy, consider talking to your vet about an appropriate diet.

Not only will this make training with food easier, but your dog will live a longer and healthier life if he is at a good weight too!

Last but not least - some dogs also do not want our treats because the training setup is too challenging. You probably have yourself been in situations when you didn't want to eat because you were too hyped up - maybe at a first date or before a big job interview. If you notice that your dog is accepting and liking your treats at home, but refusing them around his triggers, it is a good sign that you are too close to the triggers.



So, if your dog's interest in your treats seems to mostly only depend on where or how you are training, then the solution would be to start out with triggers in a lower intensity (that means further distance from visual triggers and lower volume for auditory triggers).

If your dog likes your treats at home, and he likes your treats in the first part of your training session but then starts refusing them, the solution is usually to shorten your sessions. If a dog's desire to eat noticeably decreases during training, this could on the one hand just mean he is getting full - especially in small or medium dogs. On the other hand, it can also point to the session being too intense for too long - maybe some trigger stacking was happening, or the dog crossed the threshold too often. Check out our audio segment on mental workout for your dog for more information on this topic.

Last but not least, please pay attention to my recommendation to use SMALL treats. Your dog should swallow each treat eagerly, and if he does so he will not know if the treat was small or medium or large. Every week, I get emails from students that say "Steffi, I used exactly as many treats as you said and my dog got sick and threw up!" and then they're upset with me and my teaching. But when I ask them how big the treats were, it turns out that each treat was a quarter hotdog and their dog ate a pound of hotdogs in one session. In this case, just throwing up is actually not bad - eating this much fatty food can even lead to pancreatitis!

So once more: your treats should be the size of, or smaller than, your pinkie fingernail. That means that you can actually get 100 treats out of one single hotdog. You cut it lengthwise, then rotate it 90 degrees and cut it lengthwise again - now you have 4 long and skinny hotdogs. And these you can easily cut into 25 pieces each. This way you can deliver very high value treats to your dog without the risk of him getting sick.

And a final note - we do not want to make our dogs chunky through training. So please deduct the estimated calories of the treats you work with from your dog's meals. This way we can ensure that the overall calorie intake stays the same and our dogs only gain skills through training - and not pounds.