

Training your dog:

House Training Problems Explained

Most puppies are fairly reliably house trained by the time they get to about 6 months old, although the occasional accident may happen for a while longer. Adolescent dogs that persistently urinate or defecate in the house present a problem that needs to be rectified.

Persistent problems with house training may have several causes and a physical examination by a vet is advisable if house training appears to have broken down, to rule out the possibility of illness being the cause.

Different patterns of house soiling can give clues about the root cause:

- **The dog may urinate in the house or defecate, or both.**
- **The house soiling may occur indiscriminately at any time of day or night.**
- **It may happen all around the house or always in the same place.**
- **The dog may sometimes eliminate in front of you.**
- **The dog may never eliminate where you can see him, and may go inside the house even when he has just been outside.**
- **The house soiling may only happen at night.**
- **It may only happen when the dog is left alone.**
- **An adolescent male dog may start to cock his leg against furniture or door frames around the house.**

1. Breakdown in House Training following illness:

Sometimes dogs will regress following a gastro-intestinal upset if they have been taken short in the house several times due to diarrhoea. If this is the case, a bit of extra vigilance on the part of the owner is usually all that is required to re-establish the previous good habit - by taking the dog outside regularly and praising appropriate behaviour, in effect treating him like a young puppy, it is usually possible to get him clean again quite quickly.

2. Dietary Problems:

Diet may be to blame in some cases. Some dry diets have the effect of making the dog thirsty, and overnight puddles will result due to the dog having to empty his bladder. If your dog seems to drink rather a lot, a change in diet may be helpful. The better quality dried diets such as Hills, are preferable, and if fed soaked, will further reduce the dog's need to drink large quantities at a time. In addition, the better quality dried diets tend to be high in nutrients but low in bulk and produce less quantity of faeces than the cheaper alternatives. Puppies need to empty themselves frequently partly because they have frequent small meals. By 6 months old, most dogs can be fed just 2 meals a day and will therefore need to go less often. Sometimes it helps to alter the timing of meals so that the dog is able to eliminate during the day rather than needing to go in the night.

3. Separation Problems:

House soiling may be a symptom of Separation Anxiety rather than an actual house-training problem. If this is the case you may find that the dog only house soils when you are not there and will do so even if you are only out of the house for a short time, or he may do it when shut away from the rest of the family at any time. He may also show signs of destructive behaviour, and may bark or howl when left. Dogs suffering from Separation Anxiety are

usually very clingy, staying close to their owners and following them everywhere around the house. This is a behaviour problem, and requires careful and sympathetic treatment, and, sometimes, supportive drug therapy. If you feel your dog suffers from Separation Anxiety please contact the surgery for a behaviour consultation. Meanwhile, it is important to remember that Separation Anxiety is a condition with physical symptoms that the dog cannot control, and punishment is counter-productive.

4. Scent Marking:

This is characterised by leg-cocking rather than squatting, and is dominant male behaviour. An adolescent male may start to mark his territory in this way, or an older dog may begin to do it in response to a change in circumstances such as the addition of another dog, animal or even human visitor to the household. For the adolescent dog, castration is an option and will usually cure the problem. However, scent marking is a dominant behaviour and usually accompanies other behavioural problems, so it is advisable to seek advice for this, especially in the older dog. Contact the surgery for help.

5. Training Problems:

In some instances, house training may have gone wrong due to errors in training resulting in confusion on the part of the dog - in other words, the message hasn't got across, or the dog may be getting the wrong message. If, for example, you have had the puppy during the summer when doors have been left open a lot, he may not have learned to ask to go out and will start to house soil when he no longer has unrestricted access to the garden.

Rescue dogs, or dogs that have been kennelled are sometimes confused about what is acceptable. Healthy dogs always leave their beds to urinate or defecate, and a dog accustomed to going in a kennel will not necessarily realise that a house is different to a kennel. If this dog is treated like an untrained puppy, he will soon learn. The emphasis should be on rewarding correct behaviour and ignoring mistakes.

Reward and Punishment

As with all training, reward is far more effective than punishment. Punishment after the event is useless, as dogs have very short memories, and will only associate punishment with what they are in the act of doing when it occurs. Mild punishment **when the dog is caught in the act** has its place - a cross "No!" as you pick up the puppy followed immediately by gentle encouragement and praise when you put him in the right place is all that is needed. However, it is very easy to fall into the trap of relying more on punishment than reward. If you punish after the event, the puppy will never get the message and will become anxious and upset, unable to understand why you are angry. Even properly timed punishment can have the wrong effect if over done - the dog that is shouted at, shaken or has its nose rubbed in the mess may simply learn not to do it in your presence and will creep off into other parts of the house to eliminate where you can't see him, even when you have just taken him outside. This is a major problem in that you are now unable to praise the correct behaviour because the dog won't perform at all when you are present. If you believe that this may be the problem (be honest), it will be necessary for someone else to be involved in re-training as the dog associates you with having been punished for house training errors.

Cleaning Up

When cleaning up an "accident" in the house avoid the use of disinfectants which contain ammonia. Although it may appear that the smell has been cleaned away, to a dog's acute nose, the ammonia exaggerates the smell left by urine and he may be drawn to the same spot again. Instead, use plenty of water and a biological washing powder which will destroy the source of the smell, and spray the area with Odour Eliminator (available from the surgery).

Understanding the reasons behind house training problems can enable a successful re-training programme to begin. See our Basic House Training leaflet for a suggested training programme, which is suitable for dogs of all ages, including rescue dogs, and dogs which may have spent some time in kennels. **As with all training, there are many ways of dealing with any problem. If you need further help, please contact the surgery.**

This information has been compiled by
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Further advice is available by appointment