

DOG ELIMINATION PROBLEMS

Dogs urinate and defecate to eliminate waste or to communicate with other individuals. Sometimes, dogs will also urinate and defecate when anxious or afraid. These behaviors are normal in and of themselves, but become problems when they happen in inappropriate places or at inappropriate times.

Regardless of the reason for the behavior, odor cues from soiled areas often maintain the behavior. Cleaning the soiled area with a good enzymatic cleaner is an important component of all behavior management programs.

Before deciding what else to do about these behaviors, you must determine what is motivating them for your dog.

Causes of Housesoiling and What To Do About Them

Medical Reasons. Many kinds of medical issues can cause your dog to soil in the house. Urinary tract infections, systemic diseases such as diabetes, or arthritic joints which make it difficult for your dog to get around, are just a few examples. Even if your dog doesn't act sick, if his elimination habits change, your first step is to have him examined by your veterinarian. A physical exam as well as laboratory testing may be necessary. There are a variety of non-medical causes for inappropriate elimination as well.

Housetraining Problems. Either incomplete or a breakdown in housetraining is one of the first things to consider, especially if your dog is a puppy, is new to you home, or there have been recent changes in your home environment such as a move, changes in your schedule or the composition of your family. Think back over the period of time your dog has lived with you. If there has never been a prolonged period of time—3 months or more—when your dog never soiled in the house (unless he was ill), then chances are he's never been fully housetrained.

What To Do. Refer to the Pamphlet for Pet Parents on Housetraining, and get the DVD "Housetraining: A Plan for Success" at PETSMART and PETSMART.com.

Submissive/Excitement Urination. This refers to the loss of bladder control when dogs become overly excited or feel threatened during greetings, play, or in anticipation of punishment. Submissive urination is expressed by the dog squatting and peeing or rolling over on his side and voiding, while excitement elimination is expressed by dribbling urine as he walks or jumps.

These problems are most common in young puppies and generally are outgrown within a few months, as long as owners don't respond in ways that worsen the behavior.

What To Do. Because urination often happens when people are greeting or playing with your dog, the easiest option is to simply ignore your dog when he's likely to urinate. Then pay attention or play with him when he is calmer.

Cleaning the soiled area with a good enzymatic cleaner is an important component of all behavior management programs.

Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior.

© 2008. Animal Behavior Associates, Inc.

Becoming angry with her will not help solve the problem.

Identifying the “trigger” for the urine-marking is important to resolving the problem.

You can also encourage a competing behavior by merely tossing treats on the floor while ignoring your dog. Most dogs will begin to “treasure hunt” for the treats and forget about urinating. Throwing a toy may be effective for some dogs.

When greeting or petting your dog, it’s important to avoid the following postures that your dog finds intimidating:

1. Avoid facing your dog directly. Turn the side of your body to your dog.
2. Avoid bending over at the waist and reaching out toward your dog. Instead, stand up straight, bend at the knees or sit on the floor.
3. Do not reach for your dog, but allow your dog to approach you, and pet him under the chin.
4. Do not look directly at your dog. Avoid eye contact, and instead look off in the distance, at the floor, or to the side.

As your dog learns to control his bladder and urinates less, you can gradually assume more typical greeting behaviors.

Urine Marking is most often a communicative behavior. Dogs will deposit their scent as a “calling card” to claim possession of an area or let others know they’ve been there. Leaving their own familiar scent also seems to be a response to stress or anxiety in some dogs. Urine marking is not related to “dominance” or social status.

Urine marking is characterized by small amounts of urine being deposited when a dog lifts his leg on vertical surfaces such as couches, walls or drapes. This behavior may not appear until the dog is 1 or 2 years old, and males are more prone to it than females.

What To Do. Intact males are most likely to mark and when females do mark, they do so most often when they are in heat. Thus, neutering males or spaying females reduces or stops most urine marking.

Identifying the “trigger” for the urine-marking is important to resolving the problem, but maybe difficult to do. Seeing or smelling the marks of other dogs in your neighborhood or conflicts between your own dogs are common triggers.

If you know what’s triggering the marking, teach your dog to be calmer when he sees, hears, smells, or otherwise experiences these events. You may need the help of a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant. Talk to your pet professional about help or a referral. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

Sometimes, just not allowing your dog access to his favorite marking spot stops the behavior. If you catch your dog in the act, you can squirt him with water or make a loud noise. This may stop the behavior, or only teach your dog to be more secretive when doing it.

Separation Anxiety and Other Fearful Behavior. When dogs become panicked about being left alone, or are frightened by startling noises such as fireworks or thunderstorms, they may void their bladder and/or bowels.

What To Do. Because the cause of the housesoiling is fear, appropriate behavior modification techniques must be used to relieve the fear or anxiety. You may need the help of a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist

Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior.

© 2008. Animal Behavior Associates, Inc.

or other behavior consultant. Refer to the Pamphlets for Pet Parents on The Fearful Dog and on Separation Anxiety for more information about these problems.

How Can Elimination Problems Be Prevented?

Because there are so many reasons why dogs house soil, it's not possible to give specific advice that will prevent all elimination problems.

If your dog has soiled in the house frequently, it's likely he now prefers either specific locations or surfaces (or both) that are inside, as compared to outside. These preferences can be difficult to change. Strictly following effective housetraining procedures to help your dog establish acceptable preferences for where, and on what, he likes to relieve himself will prevent many problems.

Socializing your puppy may prevent fear related problems that can lead to inappropriate urination or defecation. From a young age, teach your dog to sit quietly when visitors arrive to prevent excitement related soiling.

Gradually accustoming your dog to being left alone is also important, especially if you are not your dog's first owner. Dogs acquired from shelters or that have had several homes seem to be more prone to this problem.

The importance of spaying and neutering to prevent marking behavior has already been mentioned.

What Not To Do

Your dog is not soiling in the house because she is trying to "get even" or get revenge on you for some real or perceived slight. Nor is your dog being rebellious, "acting out" or attempting to "be the boss". Becoming angry with her will not help solve the problem.

Don't punish your dog for soiling unless you literally catch him in the act. Showing your dog the "evidence" of his misbehavior (the puddle of urine or feces on the floor) will not help him associate his previous behavior with your punishment five minutes or even five seconds later. After-the-fact punishment is unfair to your dog and ineffective.

Your dog will however, associate the punishment with whatever he was doing at the time of the punishment, such as running to the door to greet you. Inappropriate punishment causes anxiety because it is unpredictable and not connected to your dog's behavior. This can actually make your dog more likely to urinate submissively when you arrive home.

If your dog looks 'guilty' or acts 'remorseful' (cowering, hiding), he is only reacting to your behavior—your body language, facial expressions, actions and/or tone of voice. Your behaviors are threatening to him, so your dog shows submissive behaviors—which people misinterpret as "guilt"—which is his way of trying to "turn off" your displeasure.

Written by Drs. Suzanne Hetts and Daniel Q. Estep, Animal Behavior Associates, Inc. and Ms. Lori Holmberg, M.A. Drs. Hetts and Estep are Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists and international award-winning speakers and authors living in Denver, Colorado. For over 25 years they have been helping pet parents understand their pet's behavior and solve behavior problems.

Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior.

© 2008. Animal Behavior Associates, Inc.