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House Soiling in Dogs

I know that house soiling is a major reason that owners relinquish their pets to a shelter. What are tips to help owners with this problem?



House soiling (indoor urination, defecation, or urine marking) can be caused by many factors. The first step in addressing it involves performing a physical examination, urinalysis, fecal examination, and perhaps serum biochemical profile, since house soiling can be secondary to or concurrent with medical problems. Medical causes are discussed elsewhere^{1,2}; this article will discuss only behavioral causes of house soiling.

Identifying Causes

Behavioral reasons for indoor elimination include inadequate house training, marking behavior, submissive and/or excitement urination, separation anxiety or some other anxiety or phobia, cognitive dysfunction, and psychogenic polydipsia.³ A behavioral history is necessary to collect information that will lead to a diagnosis. Important information should include the daily routine, access to the elimination location, and feeding schedules (set times vs free choice). See the Box for additional history questions.

Certain answers may suggest certain diagnoses, and this can aid in designing a treatment plan.

Separation anxiety might be suspected if elimination occurs only when the owner is absent or is departing; **thunderstorm phobia** might be suspected if the dog shows signs of distress during storms. Occasionally, if **aversive methods** have been used in house training, a dog may be unwilling to eliminate in the

owner's presence and only eliminate when they are gone or out of the room.

Marking behavior might be suspected if small amounts of urine are found only on vertical surfaces or at their base. **Submissive or**

continues

Behavior History; Questions to Ask

- How long has the problem been present and did it coincide with any other changes?
- When and where does the soiling occur?
- Does the dog urinate, defecate, or both?
- Are there other animals in the home, and do they soil indoors?
- Has the dog ever been reliably house trained?
- Does outdoor elimination reliably occur at any time? Is outdoor elimination witnessed by the people in the home? Where, when, and how is the dog taken outdoors for elimination (eg, is the dog walked or placed in a yard)?
- Does the dog go all night without soiling?
- If the problem occurs when the owners are not home, what is the shortest period the owner has been gone during which soiling has occurred?
- Does the pet show signs of distress at owner departure?
- Does the pet show distress about noise, such as storms?
- Does elimination occur when the owner or others greet the dog?
- What is done when soiling occurs?
- Does the pet have a history of urinary tract or gastrointestinal problems?

excitement urination is likely if it occurs primarily on greeting or during social interactions with the dog. **Incontinence or cognitive dysfunction** should be considered in dogs that leave wet spots where they rest, if elimination occurs in the presence of the owners, or if the dog shows other signs of cognitive decline.⁴

Lack of access to the desirable elimination location, long periods without access to the elimination location (owners who work long hours), or **lack of supervision** when outdoors and inability to verify outdoor elimination before confining the pet indoors can all lead to house soiling. **Substrate or location preferences** may occur when the dog can no longer eliminate in the usual location, on the usual substrate, or in the usual manner (loose in the yard vs on a leash), or due to something aversive in the elimination location (eg, noises, other animals).

Tailoring Treatment House Training

Treatment plans should be tailored to the particular problem. To address lack of house training, the owner must be willing to use both confinement and supervision to retrain the dog to eliminate in the appropriate location. Close supervision entails knowing where the dog is at all times.

If the owners are unable to supervise, confining the dog in a small area may make soiling less likely. This should also help the owner learn the signals that the dog needs to eliminate, which include panting, pacing, pawing, or staring at the owner. At that point the dog must be taken to the appropriate elimination location. If no signs are readily apparent, the dog should be taken outside every 1 to 3 hours.

The dog is taken to the same outdoor location each time, calmly encouraged to eliminate, and rewarded **immediately**—not upon return to the house—with a food reward. If the dog does not eliminate within 5 minutes, it should be returned to the house, supervised, and taken out again in 10 to 20 minutes.

House Soiling: What to Do

- **Always rule out medical problems** with a good physical examination and laboratory testing.
- **Take a complete history**, with an emphasis on when and where elimination occurs.
- **Diagnose** the problem.
- **Discuss supervision, confinement, and positive reinforcement** of appropriate elimination with the owner.
- Follow up with the owner in 1 to 2 weeks to assess progress.

The dog should not be punished if elimination occurs when it is **unsupervised**, and any indoor urine or feces should be cleaned with an enzymatic cleaner in the dog's absence. (Cleaning in the dog's absence prevents unwanted owner responses from happening [eg, punishment, scolding].) If no indoor elimination has occurred over time, the intervals between outdoor excursions can be lengthened and the dog given more indoor access without supervision.

Lack of Access

If the problem is lack of access to the elimination location, additional arrangements should be made to enhance access. This could be a dog walker, doggy day care, a dog door, or providing an indoor location for elimination. For dogs that defecate indoors, switching from free choice to meal feeding and timing feeding so someone is home to allow access to the outdoors may be helpful.

Preferences & Anxiety Issues

Substrate or location preferences may require creative solutions as the dog learns new associations. If possible, the old substrate can be provided and then gradually phased out. Disturbing **stimuli** should be avoided, and time of day for toileting arranged so that the dog can be relaxed and calm. If the problem is severe, treatment for other fears, anxieties, and phobias may be necessary to its **resolution**.^{5,6} Dogs with separation anxiety that results in house soiling require appropriate treatment for the underlying problem.⁷

Urine Marking

Marking is most common in male dogs—having intact dogs neutered should reduce marking

behavior. Marking is often the result of underlying anxieties that need to be addressed. In other situations, supervision, confinement, and restructuring interactions can be useful for resolution.

Submissive & Excitement Urination

Submissive and excitement urination require changes in the social situation to reduce anxiety and promote calmer, predictable interactions. Greeting without bending over the dog and not touching or talking to the dog until it is settled are useful. A new greeting response, such as "sit," given once the dog has settled or signaled by a hand cue, or "get your ball" can help change underlying emotional affect and diminish urination. Punishment is absolutely contraindicated since it is likely to increase anxiety and urination.

Learned Nonelimination

Learned **nonelimination** is a rather annoying problem. It tends to occur in dogs that are walked for elimination and learn that elimination signals the end of the **walk**—these dogs learn to wait longer and longer to eliminate to prolong the time outdoors. Walking the dog 5 more minutes before heading home or teaching the dog to eliminate *before* the walk usually corrects the problem.

House soiling—although frustrating—often responds well to treatment once an appropriate diagnosis is made, and the correct treatment plan is applied. ■

See Aids & Resources, back page, for references, contacts, and appendices. Article archived on www.cliniciansbrief.com