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Dog Behavior Problems – House Soiling

Why is my dog soiling the house?

There are numerous reasons that a dog might soil the house with urine and/or stools. Determining the specific reason is essential for developing a treatment program. Dogs that soil the home continuously or intermittently from the time they were first obtained may not have been properly house trained.

"Dogs that are exhibiting an increase in anxiety may begin to eliminate in the home."

Dogs that have been previously house trained may begin to soil the home for medical reasons or for behavioral reasons. Assuming medical causes can be ruled out (see below), some of the more common behavioral causes are a change in owner schedule, a change in housing or any change in the pet's home that might lead to anxiety. For example, if you leave the dog alone for longer than the dog is accustomed, or significantly change the daily schedule or routine, your dog may begin to house-soil. Dogs that are exhibiting an increase in anxiety may begin to eliminate in the home, due primarily to a loss of control when anxious and not due to spite. Dogs that exhibit separation anxiety may soil the home and require an intensive retraining program.



Why is my dog house soiling?

The first question is whether your dog has ever been fully housetrained. If the answer is no, then you should begin by reviewing House Training and having your pet checked out to make sure that there are no medical problems. If your pet was previously house trained, and is now house soiling, then the problem could be medical, behavioral or both. With a physical examination, diagnostic tests, and a good history, it should be possible to determine whether the problem is medical or whether some change or stressors in the household may have caused the problem. Your description of the signs and problem can also help to determine whether your pet is marking (urinating on upright surfaces), incontinent (leaking urine or stool), or losing control when fearful or excited. Dogs that are exhibiting an increase in anxiety may begin to eliminate in the home.

What does it mean if my dog is urinating on upright objects?

Marking is urination on upright objects. It is most likely to occur on or near the odors, especially the urine, left by other dogs. When a dog is marking, the volume of urine is usually small. The problem is much more common in intact males, but some neutered males and spayed females will mark. Dogs may mark territory for a number of reasons including male hormonal influences, other dogs entering the property, moving to a new household or getting new furniture, or as a response to increased stress or anxiety.

Why does my dog urinate when he meets new people or I come home?

Two specific types of house soiling, submissive and excitement urination, differ from most other forms of house soiling in that the dog has little control over their elimination. Submissive urination occurs when a person approaches, reaches out, stands over or attempts to physically punish the dog. The dog not only urinates but also may show other signs of submission such as ears back, retraction of lips, avoidance of eye contact, and cowering. Although this problem can be seen in dogs of any age, submissive urination is most commonly seen in puppies and young female dogs. Owner intervention in the form of verbal reprimands or punishment only serve to aggravate the problem by making the dog act more submissive, which leads to further urination.

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Excitement urination is similar to submissive urination except the stimuli that lead to elimination are those that lead to excitement, particularly greeting and giving affection to the dog. These dogs may also be overly submissive, but not necessarily. In most cases, both excitement and fear or submission are present in dogs that exhibit this behavior. When there are competing emotions (e.g., a desire to approach and withdraw) this is known as conflict behavior.

What medical problems could cause my dog to house soil?

There are numerous medical problems that could cause or contribute to house soiling, and these become increasingly more common as the dog ages. In fact, if you have an adult dog that begins to urinate in the home, or a puppy with a refractory house soiling problem, then a medical evaluation is indicated. This is of particular concern when there is an increase in drinking, an increase in frequency of elimination, an increase in volume of elimination, or a decrease in urine or stool control or incontinence. Any other concurrent medical signs and any medications that your pet may be taking may also be important to consider. Therefore the history that you provide is critical in reaching an accurate diagnosis.

For dogs that are urinating in the home, monitor how much your pet drinks, how often your pet urinates and where your pet is soiling. Any change in your dog's normal routine should be reported. Dogs that drink more will have to urinate more often and may have poorer control. Diabetes, kidney disease, and Cushing's disease (overproduction of steroids) are some of the problems that will need to be ruled out. Dogs that urinate more frequently or have discomfort when urinating might have a bladder infection or bladder stones. A puddle of urine where your dog has been napping or sleeping may indicate incontinence, while urine leaking when the dog is excited or frightened might indicate conflict induced urination. Dogs with brain diseases including cognitive dysfunction may eliminate with no particular pattern, as they may be unable to remember their house training rules. Eliminating on upright surfaces might be indicative of marking behavior.

For dogs that are passing stools in the home, monitor your dog's eating and elimination habits to determine if stool frequency has changed (less often, more often, less regular); whether stool consistency has changed (hard, soft, diarrhea, mucus or blood in the stool), whether your dog appears to have less control (sudden urge to eliminate), whether the stool passing appears to be painful, whether stool volume has changed (constipation versus large amounts) or lacks awareness of its elimination (fecal incontinence, with stool dropping out while walking or lying down).

If we determine that it's not a medical problem, what might be the cause?

Once medical problems have been ruled out, it will first be necessary to determine if your dog is incontinent, marking, or losing control when excited or frightened. Each of these problems is discussed in separate handouts. Next it will be necessary to determine whether your dog was ever completely house trained. If not, review the basic house training guide and carefully follow each of the recommendations. If your dog was previously trained prior to soiling, the cause of the problem and the best methods to manage the soiling will need to be determined by evaluating the history. Things to consider include whether there were changes in the pet's household or schedule at the time the problem started and whether or not the pet exhibits anxiety when left alone or locked in its confinement area. Details about the home, schedule and house training techniques to date (and the dog's response) will be required.

How can house soiling be treated?

Training techniques for house soiling dogs are virtually identical to those needed to house train a new puppy. However, even if house-soiling dogs are retrained to eliminate outdoors, indoor sites may continue to be used, since the odor, substrate, and learned habit may continue to attract the dog back to the location. In addition, dogs that eliminate indoors are in essence, performing a self-rewarding behavior, since they relieve themselves and do not perceive that the area they have used is inappropriate. Dogs that eliminate indoors are in essence performing a self-rewarding behavior because they relieve themselves and do not perceive that the area they have used is inappropriate.

The key to effective house training is constant supervision. Prevent access to any sites where the dog might eliminate indoors except when you are directly supervising. Mildly correct the pet if it is caught eliminating in an inappropriate location. Accompany the dog to its appropriate elimination areas at times when elimination is necessary. Reinforce the acceptable behavior with lavish praise or food rewards when the dog eliminates in the designated area. If a word cue is used prior to each elimination-reward sequence, the dog may soon learn to eliminate on command. If you have trouble keeping the dog in sight, leave a remote indoor leash attached to the dog. This leash can also be used to deter any elimination or pre-elimination behaviors (such as sniffing, circling or squatting) in the act and to direct the dog to the appropriate area without delay. Whenever you



are not available to supervise, the dog should be housed in either a confinement area where it does not eliminate (such as a bedroom, crate, or pen), or in an area where elimination is allowed (such as a dog run, papered pen or room, or outdoors). If the confinement area also serves as the dog's bed and play area the dog is likely to keep the area clean. If the dog is anxious about being separated from the owner (separation anxiety) or confined it is likely to soil the area and become even more distressed.

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Another key component in treating house soiling in dogs is establishing a daily routine that includes exercise, sleeping times, play times, and opportunities to eliminate on a schedule that meets your dog's needs. You should try and identify those times when your dog needs to eliminate so that you can schedule walks and prevent house soiling.

Your dog must never be allowed access to indoor sites where it has previously eliminated unless you are there to supervise. Access to these areas can be denied by closing doors, putting up barricades or booby trapping the areas. Odors that might attract the pet back to the area can be reduced or removed with commercial odor counteractants. Be certain to use a sufficient amount of the odor eliminator to reach all areas where the urine has had time to soak in. The appeal of the substrate can be reduced by changing the surface covering (a plastic runner with nubs up, taking up the carpet, or electronic mats).

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Feeding schedules can be regulated to improve owner control over the elimination of stool. After a dog eats, it will usually need to eliminate in 15 to 30 minutes. Dogs that eat free-choice often need to relieve themselves at a variety of times throughout the day. Dogs that eat one or two scheduled meals each day often void in a more predictable manner therefore in house soiling problems free choice feeding is not recommended. Feeding a low-residue diet may also be of benefit because the dog often has less urgency to defecate and produces fewer stools.

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The dog that eliminates in its crate poses special problems. In these cases, crates and cages may not be the ideal training aid. Since the purpose of the crate is to provide a safe, comfortable area for the dog to "curl up and relax", it is not appropriate for dogs that are anxious about entering or staying in their cage. While this can be overcome with training techniques, it may be better to confine these dogs to a room where the dog would normally play or eat, or to an area or room where the dog naps and sleeps. Your dog must never be allowed access to indoor sites where it has previously eliminated unless you are there to supervise.

If the dog has reduced control due to its physical health, scheduling changes may need to be made. Some owners may be able to arrange their schedules so that more frequent trips to the elimination area can be provided. Alternatively, a dog walker or doggy day care may need to be considered. If the owner cannot accommodate the dog's decreased control, installing a doggy door or providing a papered area may be necessary.

When age-related cognitive decline is suspected, a drug trial with selegiline or feeding a diet enriched with antioxidants and designed to help with cognitive impairment may be useful in conjunction with retraining techniques.

How can I determine whether the soiling is due to separation anxiety?

To try and differentiate house soiling from separation anxiety, it may be necessary for the owner to keep records of when and where the elimination occurs. If the elimination takes place when the owner is gone, or the dog is prevented from being near the owner, separation anxiety should be considered. Dogs with separation anxiety generally do not feel comfortable if separated from their owners and may begin to pace, circle, bark, whine, or display other signs of anxiety as the owner

prepares to leave. Distress vocalization, salivating and destructive behavior are more common signs of separation anxiety and one or more are usually seen along with the house soiling. Dogs with separation anxiety may urinate or defecate shortly after the owner departs, even if they have just recently eliminated outdoors. A videotape of the departure can help to determine if the house soiling behavior appears to be anxiety related.

If the house soiling dog exhibits separation anxiety, treatment should be directed not only at reestablishing proper elimination habits (see above), but also at the underlying separation anxiety. Drug therapy may be useful in those cases where anxiety is a contributing factor. It should be noted that punishment at homecoming is not only useless for correcting a problem that has occurred during the owner's absence, but also serves to add to the pet's anxiety during future departures and homecomings.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, DACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, DACVB, DECAWBM
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