

Elimination Problems in Dogs

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BASIC INFORMATION

Description

Urinating and/or defecating inside the home is a common behavioral problem of dogs. If the problem is not rectified, the dog may be removed from the household by being banished to the yard, relinquished to an animal shelter, or even euthanized.

Causes

The major causes of inappropriate elimination are incomplete house-training, urine marking, anxiety disorders (separation anxiety and noise phobia), submissive urination, excitement or greeting urination, and inappropriate elimination because of underlying medical disorders.

Clinical Signs

Dogs that are incompletely house-trained deposit urine and/or stool at inappropriate locations within the home. It is common in puppies and young dogs but can become a long-term problem.

Urine marking is the deposition of urine to indicate home ranges and territories and to locate and identify females that are in heat. It often occurs in territorial, sexual, and conflict situations. Dogs may urine mark inside the home despite being otherwise well house-trained. Intact males and females in heat mark most frequently. Urine marking usually does not develop until a dog has reached sexual maturity (at about 1 year of age).

Dogs with separation anxiety or noise phobias may exhibit inappropriate elimination when they are anxious. The inappropriate elimination done by dogs with separation anxiety is easily misinterpreted as spiteful behavior.

Submissive urination is manifested in response to perceived threats or dominance signals from other dogs or humans.

Excitement or greeting urination occurs when the dog is very excited, often when owners return home and when greeting new individuals.

Many medical disorders result in house-soiling because of alterations in function of the urinary or digestive systems or decreased mobility, control, or awareness.

Diagnosis

An accurate behavioral diagnosis of the type of elimination problem is necessary for successful treatment. Diagnosis is based on the age and sex of the dog, a description of the elimination behavior, and the circumstances in which it occurs. Possible underlying medical problems must be ruled out with laboratory and other tests before a behavioral diagnosis is made.

TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

Treatment Options

The ideal treatment for incomplete house-training is prevention. If the dog is never given an opportunity to eliminate in the house,

it quickly learns to eliminate only outside. A successful training program consists of taking the dog to an appropriate location for elimination on a regular schedule, using positive reinforcement, providing constant supervision when the dog is loose in the house, and confining the animal when it is unsupervised.

Inappropriate elimination that occurs because of anxiety is treated by managing the underlying anxiety. (See **Fear and Anxiety Disorders in Dogs**.) In some cases, remedial house-training is also required.

Castration improves urine marking in 70% of intact male dogs, and spaying usually resolves heat-related marking in female dogs. When possible, remove or minimize the dog's exposure to arousing stimuli. If the dog marks at one or two places, turn those sites into water and feeding stations. Clean and apply an enzymatic odor eliminator to the marked surfaces. *DAP*, a synthetic appealing pheromone, may be helpful in some dogs to decrease anxiety and arousal level. In difficult cases, antianxiety medications may be tried.

Inappropriate management of submissive urination frequently makes it worse. In many cases, this type of urination spontaneously resolves with maturity. In general, the behavior should be ignored! Do not punish or reassure the dog. Avoid unintentional threatening and dominance gestures, and institute various management techniques. Desensitization therapy may be necessary if management changes are inadequate. Medications to relieve anxiety or increase urethral tone may be considered in cases that do not resolve with behavioral methods.

If the dog exhibits excitement or greeting urination, greeting should not be eliminated; however, the greeting routine can be changed to reduce the consequences. Make inside greetings low-key and calm. If possible, call the dog outside and greet it there. Redirect excitement and exuberance to running and playing. Greeting urination often resolves with maturity. If it does not, specific desensitization training may be necessary. Medications to relieve anxiety or increase urethral tone may be considered in cases that do not resolve with behavioral methods.

Prognosis

Prognosis for many elimination problems is good as long as the correct diagnosis is determined and appropriate treatment is implemented. Urine marking significantly improves in most dogs with neutering, over several weeks to months. Submissive and excitement or greeting urination cases that do not resolve with maturity are challenging and may require additional evaluation. Inappropriate elimination resulting from anxiety disorders is more problematic, because permanently resolving separation anxiety or noise phobia is unlikely.