

Houstraining Your Puppy

Houstraining a puppy requires time, vigilance, patience and commitment. By following the procedures outlined below, you can minimize house soiling incidents, but virtually every puppy will have an accident in the house (more likely several). This is part of raising a puppy and should be expected. The more consistent you are in following the basic houstraining procedures, the faster your puppy will learn acceptable behavior. It may take several weeks to houstrain your puppy and with some of the smaller breeds it might take longer. A puppy can usually be considered reliably houstrained when it has not had any accidents for two to three months.

Establish a Routine

- Your puppy will do best if he is taken outside on a consistent and frequent schedule. He should have the opportunity to eliminate after waking up from a nap, after playing, and after eating.
- Choose a location not too far from the door to be the bathroom spot. Always take your puppy, on a leash, directly to the bathroom spot. Taking him for a walk or playing with him directly after he has eliminated will help him to associate good things with elimination. If you clean up an accident in the house, take the soiled rags or paper towels and leave them in the bathroom spot. The smell will help your puppy recognize the area as the place he is supposed to eliminate. While your puppy is eliminating, use a word or phrase, like “go potty”, that you can eventually use before he eliminates to remind him what he’s supposed to be doing.
- Praise your puppy lavishly every time he eliminates outdoors. You can even give him a treat. You must praise him or treat him immediately after he’s finished eliminating, not after he comes back inside the house. This step is vital; because rewarding your puppy for eliminating outdoors is the only way he’ll know that this is an appropriate behavior.
- If possible, put your puppy on a regular feeding schedule. Depending on their age, puppies usually need to be fed three or four times a day. Feeding your puppy at the same times each day will make it more likely that he’ll eliminate at consistent times as well. This makes houstraining easier, for both of you.

Supervise, Supervise, Supervise

Don’t give your puppy an opportunity to soil in the house. He should be watched at all times when he is indoors. You can tether him to you with a leash or use baby gates to keep him in your view. Watch for signs that he needs to eliminate, like sniffing around or circling. When you see these signs, immediately take him outside, on a leash, to his bathroom spot. If he eliminates, praise him lavishly and reward him with a treat.

Confinement

When you’re unable to watch your puppy closely, he should be confined to an area small enough that he won’t want to eliminate there. It should be just big enough for him to comfortably stand, lie down, and turn around. This area could be a portion of a bathroom or laundry room, blocked off with boxes or baby gates. Or you may want to crate train your puppy and use the crate to confine him (see our handout: “Crate Training Your Dog”). If your puppy has spent several hours in confinement, make sure to take him out directly to his bathroom spot before doing anything else.

Oops!

Expect your puppy to have an accident in the house – it's a normal part of housetraining.

- When you catch him in the act of eliminating in the house, do something to interrupt him, like make a startling noise (be careful not to scare him). Immediately take him to his bathroom spot, praise him, and give him a treat if he finishes eliminating there.
- Don't punish your puppy for eliminating in the house. If you find a soiled area, it's too late to administer a correction. Do nothing but clean it up. Rubbing your puppy's nose in it, taking him to the spot, and scolding him (or any other punishment or discipline) will only make him afraid of you or afraid to eliminate in your presence. Animals don't understand punishment after the fact, even if it's only seconds later. Punishment will do more harm than good.
- Cleaning the soiled area is very important because puppies are highly motivated to continue soiling in areas that smell like urine or feces (see our handout: "Successful Cleaning to Remove Pet Odors and Stains").

It's extremely important that you use the supervision and confinement procedures outlined above to minimize the number of accidents. If you allow your puppy to eliminate frequently in the house, he'll get confused about where he's supposed to eliminate, which will prolong the housetraining process.

Paper Training

A puppy under 6 months of age cannot be expected to control his bladder for more than a few hours at a time. If you have to be away from home for more than four or five hours a day, this may not be the best time for you to get a puppy. If you're already committed to having a puppy and have to be away from home for long periods of time, you'll need to train your puppy to eliminate in a specific place indoors. Be aware, however that doing so can prolong the process of teaching him to eliminate outdoors. Teaching your puppy to eliminate on newspaper may create a life-long surface preference, meaning that he may, even in adulthood, eliminate on any newspaper he finds lying around the house.

When your puppy must be left alone for long periods of time, confine him to an area with enough room for a sleeping space, a playing space, and a separate place to eliminate. In the area designated as the elimination place, you can either use newspapers, a sod box, or litter. To make a sod box, place sod in a container, like a child's small, plastic swimming pool. You can also find dog litter products at pet supply stores. If you clean up an accident in the house, take the soiled rags or paper towels, and put them in the designated elimination place. The smell will help your puppy recognize the area as the place where he is supposed to eliminate.

Other Types of Housesoiling Problems

If you've consistently followed the housetraining procedures and your puppy continues to eliminate in the house, there may be another reason for his behavior.

- **Medical Problems:** House soiling can often be caused by physical problems, such as a urinary tract infection or a parasite infection. Check with your local veterinarian to rule out any possibility of disease or illness.
- **Fearful/Excitement Urination:** Some dogs, especially young ones, temporarily lose control of their bladders when they become excited or feel threatened. This usually occurs during greetings, intense play, or when they're about to be punished (see our handout: "Fearful and Excitement Urination").

- **Urine-Marking:** Dogs sometimes deposit urine or feces, usually in small amounts, to scent-mark. Both male and female dogs do this, and it most often occurs when there is instability in their relationships (see our handout: “Marking Behavior in Dogs”).
- **Separation Anxiety:** Dogs that become anxious when they’re left alone may house soil as a result. Usually, there are other symptoms, such as destructive behavior or vocalization (see our handout: “Separation Anxiety”).
- **Fears or Phobias:** When animals become frightened, they may lose control of their bladder and/or bowels. If your puppy is afraid of loud noises, such as thunderstorms or fireworks, he may house soil when he’s exposed to these sounds (see our handout: “Helping Your Dog Overcome the Fear of Thunder and Other Startling Noises”).