

Behavior Medicine

Tips on Houstraining Your Dog

Houstraining your dog will be quicker and easier if you keep two principals in mind: Principle #1: reward your dog every time she eliminates in the right place and Principle #2: prevent her from making mistakes.

The Basics:

During your dog's waking hours, take her outdoors on a schedule. How often she needs to go out depends on her age. Even young puppies can be expected to "hold it" for at least a short period of time. As a general rule, that can translate to one hour for each month of age, give or take an hour. For example, your 3-month old puppy might resist urination for three to four hours. Assume that puppies may need to eliminate after eating, naps, strenuous play, or whenever there is a change of activity. Adult dogs should be given an opportunity to go out about every four hours when possible, but can reasonably be expected to hold their urine for 8 hours or longer. Some medical conditions can make it necessary for an adult dog to urinate more frequently.

You should take your dog to the same place to eliminate every time. Not only will your dog make a visual association with that location and the reason why they are being taken there, but in time there will also be an olfactory cue (odor) as well. Dogs generally like to eliminate where they have done so before. Unless your dog has already shown a preference for eliminating in a certain spot, choose a potty area to your liking. Chances are that even after your dog is houstrained and going out on her own, she will continue to use this spot. If you do not have a yard and need to walk your dog to relieve herself, consider establishing a toilet area directly adjacent to your home. Take your dog to the toilet area as soon as you exit the house, and remain there until the dog urinates and defecates.

If you want your dog to eventually signal to you when she needs to go out, you should always take her out and back in through the same exit door. That being said, however, it is important to be aware that not all dogs learn automatically to signal the need to eliminate, in a way that their owners understand (such as by barking or scratching at a door).

Principle #1:

As your dog finishes eliminating (but not before she has finished), immediately praise her verbally and give her an extra special food treat. In order for your dog to understand that the treat is for the elimination behavior, it must be delivered immediately following that behavior.

Consider the puppy whose owner has let her out to do her "business" by herself. She has appropriately urinated in the far corner of the yard. The puppy then heads for the house. First she stops to sniff an interesting bush, then she barks at the neighbor's dog, before finally coming through the door and sitting in front of her proud owner. If her owner now gives her the treat, what behavior do you think the puppy will associate with the reward? Dogs will associate a reward with whatever behavior they did *immediately* prior to receiving the reward. Therefore, you should always take your dog out to eliminate

Behavior Medicine

on a leash during the housetraining process in order to be able to deliver her reward in a timely manner.

It may also be helpful to withhold a play session or walk until after your dog has eliminated, so that she learns that eliminating must always occur before other fun activities begin. If you reward both generously with high value food treats *and* with a walk, the walk actually becomes a reward for elimination. This way, you do not need to walk with your dog for an indeterminate length of time until she eliminates, thereby allowing the dog to set the length of the walk. It's easiest to establish this routine at times when you know your dog really has to go, like first thing in the morning and when you return home from work. Urination may be easier to train in this way than defecation, as some dogs need to move around in order to defecate (e.g., walk a little bit), and some do not defecate at regular times (e.g., once in the morning and once in the evening, every day).

Principle #2: Avoid allowing your dog to make mistakes by:

1. Taking your dog out with adequate frequency (see above)
2. Taking her out on a regular schedule
3. Directly supervising or confining her when she can't be outdoors

Unless your dog was previously confined for long periods in dirty living conditions, she will naturally tend to avoid eliminating in places where she must sleep or eat. This instinct is important when it comes to housetraining and one of the reasons why the use of a crate as well as other long-term confinement areas can be helpful, especially for puppies.

Use of a crate to aid in housetraining:

Begin by acclimating your dog to the crate. You may then use this as a tool for confining her at night, when you are gone for short periods, and when you are home and unable to supervise her. If she must be unattended for longer than the general rules stated above, your dog shouldn't be crated. Instead, consider the use of an exercise pen or a baby gate to confine her to a slightly larger area, such as the kitchen, bath, or laundry room. This will still allow her to maintain a natural cleanliness because she can eat and sleep away from the areas where she has soiled.

Make sure the long-term confinement area that you have chosen is thoroughly dog-proofed. Remove all mats and throw rugs, wastepaper baskets and trash cans, clear all counters, pick-up all shoes, children's toys, etc., tuck shower curtains into the tub, etc. Alternatively, you can hire a dog walker or have a neighbor take your puppy out as needed during the work week or whenever you are unavailable to do it yourself.

To paper train or not to paper train?

To ease cleanup and to train your dog to urinate and defecate on a specific surface, you may place newspapers or wee-wee pads in the previously soiled area. The dog can then be rewarded for eliminating on these surfaces. She will eventually need to be taught to make the transition from eliminating on the papers or pads to voiding outside, on grass, dirt, mulch, etc. It is important to

Behavior Medicine

remember that the dog will not necessarily make this change easily (particularly if the weather, etc., make it more comfortable to eliminate indoors). The use of newspapers, so-called paper training, can be avoided altogether if you can take your dog outdoors frequently from the beginning. Very small dogs can be trained to use a litter box. This is done by moving the newspapers to a shallow box once the dog has learned to eliminate on them, and over the course of days to weeks, gradually add some form of litter on top of the papers. Once the dog is eliminating regularly on the litter, the paper or pads can be removed. The dog will need to be rewarded for appropriate elimination frequently throughout this process.

If your dog had been closely confined in the past for longer than she was able to hold her urine and feces, you may not be able to use a crate for housetraining. Dogs forced to eliminate where they eat and slept tend to adapt to those living conditions, usually making housetraining a more difficult proposition. In this situation, you may need to tether your dog to you with a light line about 6 feet in length (“umbilical cord”), to keep her close to you so that you will be alerted by her preparations to eliminate (e.g., sniffing, circling, squatting), and be able to distract her and take her outside immediately. If this is not feasible, the dog can be confined with you wherever you are. You will have to be alert to the above behaviors. The idea is to prevent her from eliminating “in private” in another part of the house. Some dogs who have been scolded or punished for eliminating indoors in their owner’s presence will avoid eliminating if any person is present. It can be a challenge to convince such dogs that it is “safe” and desirable to eliminate when you take them outside; they may resist eliminating until they can get away from you, even for a short time.

Specific Recommendations:

- Take your dog out to eliminate every _____ hours while awake.
- Do not use a crate for housetraining your dog.
- Use a crate for housetraining your dog.
- Use an exercise pen or a tiled area in your home i.e. kitchen, bathroom, powder room, laundry room for long-term confinement of your dog.
- Keep your dog tethered to you when she is not outside or in her confinement area.
- Keep your leash and food treats next to the door you exit to take your dog outdoors.
- Do not wait for your dog to tell you when she needs to go out; take your dog out every _____ hours during the day.
- Confine the dog to the same room you are in and observe her for signs that she needs to eliminate.
- Take the dog you are trying to housetrain outside without your other dog(s) to eliminate distractions such as the desire to play or concern about conflict with the other dog.

Behavior Medicine

Teach Your Dog to Eliminate on Cue:

Sometimes a dog that is housetrained will need to eliminate on a new surface (such as concrete rather than grass, after moving from the country to the city), or in a new location (such as just outside the door, for instance, if you are unable to take her for a long walk). In these circumstances, it can be very useful to teach the dog to eliminate in response to a verbal cue. Follow the instructions below to teach your dog to eliminate on cue:

- a. Take your dog out on a schedule each day, on a leash.
- b. Take our dog to the same spot.
- c. Stay in that location with her until she eliminates. When she starts to, say, "Go pee" (or whatever your cue word is). Wait until she has finished, and reward her with food.
- d. Make sure that you are rewarding her when she is completely done so that she does not stop urinating to get the treat.
- e. After she urinates, she may go for her long walk, if you are taking her on one. Whenever your dog starts to eliminate, say, "Go pee", wait until she has finished, and give her a reward.
- f. For the first week or two, do NOT say, "Go pee", to her unless she is actually in the process of eliminating. The cue will only work later if it is strongly associated with the desired behavior.
- g. Once your dog is eliminating consistently with this routine, watch her for signs that she is about to eliminate, and say, "Go pee". When she does, give her a treat. If you were mistaken and she does not go after your cue words, go back to saying the cue only while she is in the process of eliminating for a couple of days.
- h. When you are saying, "Go pee" as you see your dog start to look as though she is about to eliminate, and she is reliably doing so, you can start to move the cue earlier in the sequence, i.e., when you first take her outside. Eventually, this cue should work even when you are in an unusual location (for instance, visiting friends or family). Remember that your dog can't defecate on cue in the same way that she can urinate.