



Housetraining Your Adult Dog or Puppy

Having a reliably housetrained dog is a very important goal for most owners. Whether you've just gotten a puppy or adopted an older dog that isn't housetrained, the same training principles apply. A dog who was previously housetrained may need a refresher since time spent in a kennel or changes in their schedule can make even the best-trained dogs lose habits they developed in the past.

Here are some guidelines for helping you successfully housetrain your dog.

Help Them Understand What You Want

When you housetrain a dog, you're taking advantage of their built-in instinct not to soil their own den. Dogs have a natural aversion to eliminating near where they sleep or eat. However, your house is much larger than a wild dog's den, and it can be a challenge to help the dog understand that the entire house qualifies as a "no-go zone."

There are two main ways dogs determine permissible areas for elimination. One is by smell. Odors of urine or feces, whether from their own previous mistakes or from other dogs, attract dogs back to the same spot. That's why it's vitally important to clean each mistake thoroughly with an enzymatic cleaner meant for pet stains (See "Cleaning Pet Stains and Odors").

The other way dogs determine permissible spots is by "foot feel." If a dog gets in the habit of feeling grass or dirt underfoot every time they eliminate, they'll prefer to go there; however, if they get used to feeling carpet, it can be very difficult to break that habit. And if you've been letting them eliminate on concrete, they may have a hard time distinguishing that from a floor. So choose potty zones for your dog that don't resemble anything they might find indoors.

It's up to you to keep your dog from making mistakes and going in the house, because mistakes create odors that attract your dog back, as well as establishing "foot feel" for indoor surfaces. Keep reading for advice on how to keep your dog from making mistakes and how to help them understand what you expect.

Establish a Routine

Make sure to take your dog out on a regular schedule--for example, first thing in the morning, after meals, before they're confined, and before bedtime each day. Feeding your dog on a regular schedule (twice a day, morning and evening) rather than leaving food available all the time will help to establish an elimination routine.

Reward your dog for eliminating in the proper place, with praise, a treat, or play. This is the most important part: letting your dog know when they do what you want. You need to reward them just as they finish, not after they've come back to the house, so it's important to go out with your dog while they're learning.

Be careful, too, about bringing your dog back indoors the moment they finish eliminating. If the dog realizes that the outdoor explorations end as soon as they eliminate, they may delay that moment as long as possible. Let them enjoy some “yard time” or a game with you after they go, and they’ll be eager to get the elimination process out of the way quickly.

Take your dog to the same place each time. The scents from previous visits can prompt your dog to use the spot again. Make sure it’s not too far away from the door or too hard to get to. Also, if your dog hates to get wet in the rain, you may want to choose a relatively sheltered area under the eaves or a tree.

Watch your dog for signs that they need to go. Some dogs give very clear signals, but others are harder to recognize at first. Signs may include pacing, sniffing, whining, circling, or leaving the room. When you see one or more of these signs, take your dog out immediately.

Supervise!

Keep your dog under your direct supervision at all times in the house while they’re learning. You can use baby gates to keep your dog in the same room as you, or attach your dog to you with a leash. While you’re supervising, you can see any signs that your dog may need to eliminate and get them out right away. This isn’t easy, but it’s essential for having a reliably housetrained dog!

If your dog starts to eliminate in the house, you can catch them in the act by interrupting them with a startling sound (“Ah-ah!” with a clap of your hands, for example), then rushing them outside to finish. Praise them for going outdoors. You can do this *only* when you can catch them at the very moment they’re eliminating—even a few seconds later is too late.

Stay positive during the entire process of interrupting them and showing them what you want. If you get angry and scold or scare your dog, you may be sending them the message that it’s not okay to eliminate in front of you – anywhere. This leads to the dog sneaking away from you in order to go and may create a permanent issue.

It can be very helpful to associate a cue (such as “go potty”) with the act of elimination. Repeat the cue while your dog is eliminating and they will learn to associate the phrase with the act. You can also use a cue (“Do you need to go out?”) to help your dog “tell” you when they need to be taken out. Every time you open the door for them to go out, repeat this phrase, and soon your dog will respond to it excitedly when they really need to go.

When you can’t watch your dog, confine them somewhere small enough that they won’t want to eliminate there, but large enough to be comfortable—at least enough room to stand up, turn around, stretch out. If you want to, you can crate train your dog (see “Crate Training Your Dog”).

When your dog has been confined for a period of time, make sure to take them out right away and praise when they use the right place. When your dog has been outside and eliminated, it’s a good time to bring them back in and allow them some freedom, starting with short periods and working up to longer ones.

When Mistakes Happen

Remember that a housetraining mistake is really more your mistake than your dog’s. You weren’t watching closely enough, you didn’t take your dog out often enough, or you didn’t confine them while you were gone. Clean the spot thoroughly (using an enzymatic cleaner, as mentioned before) and move on.

When your dog eliminates indoors and you don't catch them as they do it, it's too late to let them know. If you get angry after the fact, your dog won't understand why you're angry -- even if you take them to the soiled spot, show them, or put their nose in it. Dogs don't understand punishment after the fact. Even if you catch them in the act, punishment can make them anxious or afraid of you, which will prevent them from learning what you want.

Other Reasons for House Soiling

There are reasons besides lack of housetraining that dogs may eliminate in the house. If you're having difficulty housetraining your dog or if your dog's habits change, these are some possibilities:

Medical problems

Check with your veterinarian to rule out medical issues such as urinary tract infections.

Territorial marking

While this is more common among male dogs, any dog, male or female, neutered, spayed, or not, may mark their territory with urine or feces. This can occur with adopted dogs in their new homes, as well as dogs already in a home when a new pet is introduced. This can be dealt with in much the same way as regular housetraining: supervise, interrupt and redirect the dog, then clean the stain thoroughly with an enzyme cleaner.

Excitement or submissive urination

Some dogs urinate when they're very excited or feel threatened. This is more common in younger dogs, but can occur with dogs of any age. (See "Submissive and Excitement Urination").

Separation anxiety

Some dogs panic when left alone or separated from their owners, and may eliminate indoors as part of that panic response. There are usually other signs of separation anxiety as well. (See "Separation Anxiety").

Fears or phobias

A dog who is fearful or phobic may eliminate in a panic as a result of something in the environment, such as fireworks or thunder. (See "Dogs Who Fear Thunder, Fireworks, or Other Loud Noises").

Special Considerations for Puppies and Small Dogs

While the housetraining approach and steps are the same for all dogs, puppies and small dogs present an additional challenge. Here are some things to keep in mind while housetraining a young puppy or small dog:

- Puppies and small dogs have small bladders and need to urinate more frequently than larger dogs. In addition, puppies have less control over their sphincter muscles. Make sure you schedule more frequent "potty breaks" for puppies and small dogs.
- First thing in the morning, carry your puppy or small dog outdoors rather than having them walk there. After waiting all night to go, they may not be able to hold it for the distance to the door.
- A house seems huge to a puppy or small dog, and just because they're housetrained in the kitchen doesn't mean they'll realize that this extends to the living room or bedroom. You need to supervise and use the "do you need to go out?" cue in every room of the house.

- Puppies and small dogs may be more averse to bad weather than larger, older dogs. Some owners of small dogs may find that their dog suddenly loses its housetraining habits when winter comes. Try to provide a sheltered spot for elimination in bad weather.
- Many small dog owners opt for training their dog to puppy pads or a litterbox. Puppies can also be trained to puppy pads, although if they are going to be large when they grow up you'll have to make a transition to full housetraining at some point. Puppy pads are particularly useful if you're gone for a many hours each day and there's nobody available to let your dog out.

Puppy pads have issues of their own, though. They can be expensive to keep buying, and your dog may decide that your throw rugs, blankets, or carpets are good substitutes for puppy pads. For this reason you may want to obtain a "grass litterbox" that provides the foot feel of grass but is cleanable like a litterbox. If you don't want your dog eliminating indoors, even in a box, locate the box in a like a garage, porch, or patio, accessible by a dog door. Look for them on the Web under names like Potty Patch, Porch Potty and Patio Park.

A good resource for housetraining information is **Way to Go! How to Housetrain a Dog of Any Age** by Patricia McConnell, PhD and Karen London, PhD. Many web sites carry this book, and it's also available at the Sacramento SPCA retail store.

For more information on behavior and training for dogs and cats, please visit our web site at www.sspca.org/pet-carebehavior/.