

How To Housebreak Your New Puppy

Start at the ideal age.

The best time to begin housebreaking a puppy is when it is 7½ to 8½ weeks old. At this age, you can teach the puppy where to eliminate before it has established its own preferences. But don't worry if your puppy is older when you start housebreaking; it will still learn, though it may take a little longer.

Six to eight times a day, take your puppy outdoors to eliminate.

Choose an appropriate spot to take the puppy immediately after it wakes up, after play sessions, and 15 to 30 minutes after meals. If you take your puppy to the same spot every day, previous odors will stimulate it to urinate or defecate. Many puppies need 15 to 20 minutes of moving around and sniffing before they eliminate. Stay with the puppy the whole time. Housebreaking problems can result if you're unsure whether the puppy actually eliminated and you let it return to the house too soon. And remember the puppy needs to focus on the job at hand, so don't play with it until it has eliminated.

Use a key phrase while your puppy eliminates.

If you repeat the same phrase (e.g. "go potty" or "take care of business") every time your puppy eliminates outdoors, it will learn that this phrase means that it's the right time and place to eliminate.

Once the puppy eliminates outdoors, immediately reward it.

Reward the puppy by praising it, giving it a treat, or playing with it. But remember to reward it right away. The puppy will not learn to eliminate outdoors if the reward comes when it returns to the house. Instead, the puppy will think that it's being rewarded for coming inside.

Supervise the puppy indoors as well as outdoors.

Find a room in your house that allows you to watch your puppy as much as possible. This will help you catch the puppy if it starts to eliminate indoors. You can also leash the puppy or place a bell on its collar to help you keep track of it.

When you leave home, put the puppy in a crate.

When you can't supervise your puppy, leave it in a small puppy-proof area such as a crate. If the crate is large enough to accommodate the puppy as an adult, partition it to avoid having the puppy soil one end and sleep in the other. And remember that young puppies' bladder and bowel capacities are limited, so let the puppy out at least every four hours.

Don't punish after the fact.

If your puppy has an accident in the house, don't go get the puppy and rub its nose in it. This doesn't do any good because the misbehavior has already occurred. Instead, try to catch the puppy in the act. If you see the puppy getting ready to housoil, don't swat it, but stomp your foot, shake a can filled with pennies, or startle the puppy by yelling "outside!" The puppy will likely stop what it's doing, and you can take it outdoors to eliminate

Don't leave food out all day.

Feed your puppy at set times every day, and remove the food bowl after 20 minutes. This will create regular intervals at which the puppy will need to eliminate.

Thoroughly clean areas where the puppy has eliminated in the house.

Your veterinarian can recommend a safe, effective product that removes both odors and stains. It's important to clean a soiled area completely, otherwise your puppy may return to it and housoil again.

Stick with the training program.

Most puppies can be successfully housebroken by 14 to 20 weeks of age. But a pet may take longer to housebreak for several reasons. Consult your veterinarian if you're having difficulty.

A practitioner's guide to housebreaking puppies

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ONE OF THE MAIN concerns new puppy owners have is how to housebreak their dogs. Although this topic has been covered many times before, it bears repeating, especially because misconceptions about housebreaking abound. This article will help you steer your clients through the housebreaking process.

Elimination behavior

Understanding elimination behavior in dogs provides a solid background for helping owners housebreak their pets. Elimination behavior in dogs involves more than urinating and defecating to remove bodily wastes. It also involves surface and location preferences, body postures, sphincter capabilities, and bladder and colon capacities.

Urination and defecation in newborn puppies is stimulated by the bitch's licking the urogenital area. As the bitch stimulates elimination, it ingests urine and feces. Within the first one to two weeks of life, puppies may initiate elimination, but the bitch will still ingest the excreta. In their third week of life, puppies begin to move away from the nest to eliminate, and by 5 weeks they begin urinating and defecating in a regular location.¹ At 8 1/2 weeks, when puppies are more firmly establishing a regular location, they start to develop substrate (surface) preferences for elimination.²

Elimination postures differ between male and female puppies as young as 2 months of age.¹ Male puppies tend to stand and lean forward during urination, and female puppies squat. Male puppies usually do not begin leg lifting until they are 4 to 6 months old. Females usually continue to use a squatting posture into adulthood.

As mentioned above, puppies begin to have rudimentary voluntary control over elimination when they are a few weeks old. At this time, because of their small size and resultant limited bladder capacity, puppies need to urinate at least six times a day.³ Between 3 and 8 weeks of age, puppies develop independent neuromuscular control that aids in bladder and bowel control as well.²

The steps in housebreaking puppies

Start at the ideal age. The best time to begin housebreaking a puppy is when it is 7 1/2 to 8 1/2 weeks old, when substrate and location preferences are forming in young puppies.² At this age, an owner can teach a puppy where to eliminate and what substrate to use before the puppy establishes its own preferences. With supervision, restricted access, and frequent appropriate opportunities to eliminate, most puppies can be successfully housebroken.

Take the puppy outside to eliminate

The first step in housebreaking a puppy is to take it outside frequently to eliminate. The owner should take the puppy outside immediately after it awakes, after play sessions, and 15 to 30 minutes after meals for a total of six to eight times a day.² Once outside, the puppy should be allowed to sniff and

investigate potential elimination locations, preferably on a leash. The owner should choose the location carefully. To minimize the possibility of the puppy's contracting parasitic or infectious diseases, the owner should avoid areas where many other dogs eliminate. A consistent location for elimination should be used so that previous odors can help stimulate the puppy to urinate or defecate. Many puppies may need 15 to 20 minutes of sniffing and movement before elimination occurs. Movement is important to stimulate elimination, but playtime should be discouraged until the dog has eliminated.

While the puppy is defecating, the owner should repeat a key phrase (e.g. "go potty" or "take care of business"). The puppy will learn to associate this phrase with an appropriate time and location for elimination. To avoid confusing the puppy, choose a simple phrase not commonly used in conversation. Teaching a pet to eliminate on cue can benefit an owner in inclement weather, when fecal or urine samples are needed, or when traveling.

As puppies show signs of progress, they can be taught to signal to go outside. For example, a dog can be taught to nudge a bell hung on a doorknob ("doggy doorbell") with its nose or paw when it needs to go outside. To do this, the owner should encourage the dog to touch the doorbell and should reward the dog for this accomplishment by opening the door. Repeated encouragement and reward should teach the pet to use the doorbell when it wishes to go outside. Another way to teach a puppy to signal its need to go outside is to question the dog with a key phrase (e.g. "Need to go out?"); the pet's reaction will indicate whether it needs to eliminate. And some dogs can be taught to bark to signal the need to go outdoors to eliminate.

Reward the puppy

An owner should reward a puppy while it is eliminating or immediately afterward (within 15 seconds and before it moves away and engages in another behavior), not once the puppy has returned to the house. Rewards for proper and timely elimination can be food treats, praise, or playtime. By offering these, the owner teaches the puppy to associate a reward with eliminating outside on the appropriate surface and in the desired location. For this reason, the owner must accompany the puppy outside to monitor elimination behavior. Housebreaking problems can result when an owner is unsure whether a pet actually eliminated outside.

Supervise the puppy indoors

When a puppy is inside, it should be supervised as much as possible. Using a leash or placing a bell on the puppy's collar can help owners keep track of the puppy's whereabouts. When the puppy cannot be supervised, it should be left in a small puppy-proof area such as a crate or large box. A crate large enough to accommodate the puppy as an adult may need to be partitioned to avoid having the puppy soil in one end and sleep in the other. Remind owners that bladder and bowel capacities are limited in young dogs, so requiring puppies to be confined for long periods without access to appropriate elimination locations will result in soiling.

Owners who need to be away from home all day may have a more difficult time housebreaking a puppy. It is unrealistic to expect a puppy to last eight to 10 hours without needing to eliminate, even if it can do so overnight. An 8- to 12-week-old puppy can usually go about two to four hours without needing to eliminate.⁴ When left alone for longer periods, a puppy may be forced to eliminate in its confinement area or elsewhere in the house. This puppy will learn indoor location and substrate preferences. When leaving a puppy for prolonged periods is unavoidable, the owner must provide an acceptable substrate and elimination location. These can be paper or commercially available housebreaking pads left inside a crate or confinement area. But the puppy must have enough space to sleep away from its waste. When at home, owners using the paper-training technique should frequently take their puppies outdoors to eliminate and should discourage indoor elimination by removing the paper or pads and closely supervising the puppy. As the puppy gains increased bladder and bowel

control, the substrate can gradually be eliminated.' Most 7- to 9-month-old puppies can go eight to 10 hours without soiling. But if the owner can arrange for someone to let the puppy out after about four hours, partitioning a large crate to encourage the puppy to wait may be preferable.

Properly feed and water the puppy

Feeding and watering routines affect housebreaking. Regular feeding times help control fecal elimination by taking advantage of the gastrocolic reflex. A full stomach encourages colonic contractions within 10 to 30 minutes and increases the likelihood that a puppy will need to eliminate when taken outside.' Discourage free-choice feeding because it does not allow an owner to take advantage of this reflex. But water should be given free-choice. Water restriction to decrease urination is not a good idea, especially in warm climates. Normal water intake in dogs is 60 to 100 ml/kg of body weight per day. 6 This amount can vary with exercise and weather conditions. Encourage owners to report episodes of excessive drinking or elimination.

Punish puppies for housesoiling

For punishment to be effective, it must be given consistently and immediately when the misbehavior occurs.

But many owners don't see their puppies eliminate in an inappropriate location; instead they discover the waste later. They then drag the puppy over to the waste, shove its nose in it, and scold it. This does not teach the puppy to eliminate appropriately. And worse, it may create a fear of the owner, a fear of the owner's finding elimination, an avoidance of eliminating in front of the owner, or a fear of that location. Such inappropriate punishment can even lead to defensive aggression.

So what should owners do when their puppies housesoil? Using an aversive noise such as a foot stomp, a shaker can (an aluminum can with pennies inside), or even a loud vocal command can startle the puppy and abort the behavior. The puppy should then be hustled outside to eliminate in the appropriate location and on the correct substrate. The reprimand needs to be given at the onset of behaviors leading up to elimination such as sniffing and circling, and that is why supervision is crucial. Puppies may only briefly exhibit these behaviors, and some puppies just stop moving before elimination—they do not sniff and circle at all. Supervision allows an owner to set up a puppy to succeed by eliminating in the proper location on the proper substrate.

Clean soiled areas

Proper cleaning of soiled areas is important when housebreaking puppies. Many products with enzymatic or bacterial action remove stains and prevent odors that may stimulate the puppy to return to the area and soil again.⁷

Teach dogs advanced housebreaking techniques

Once elimination behaviors have been solidified (i.e. when puppies reliably eliminate in the proper location and do not housesoil, which occurs around 4 to 6 months of age), owners should introduce their puppies to new elimination locations and substrates. For example, dogs that usually eliminate in the yard should be taught to eliminate on a leash, and dogs that are usually leash-walked should have the opportunity to eliminate unleashed in enclosed areas. If the pet's housing conditions change, this versatility helps minimize housesoiling problems. Using a key phrase will help the dog know what behavior is being requested.

Expected progress and potential problems

Owners are often frustrated when housebreaking takes longer than expected. With constant supervision and frequent access (every several hours at first and then regular walks at three to five-hour intervals) to

the appropriate location, most puppies can be housebroken by 14 to 20 weeks of age. But a pet may take longer to housebreak for several reasons.

Owners who must be gone for long periods may find that housebreaking takes longer. When housebreaking seems delayed, asking the owners about supervision and outdoor access often reveals steps in the housebreaking process that need extra attention. For example, not all puppies learn to signal to go outside. Some may go to the door and, if no one lets them out, eliminate in that location. In addition, address any potential medical problems that could cause housesoiling.

If housesoiling occurs only when the owner is away, separation anxiety may be part of the problem. Dogs with separation anxiety usually show other signs of distress as the owner prepares to depart, including panting, drooling, or excessive excitement, and may vocalize or be destructive when the owner is gone. To determine whether separation anxiety is the reason a dog eliminates in the home, make sure the history reveals that the dog does not eliminate inside when the owner is present.

Conclusion

By educating owners about the factors that influence elimination behavior in puppies, you can help them avoid housesoiling problems later in their pets' lives. Housesoiling problems account for 15% to 24% of behavior problems in adult dogs.⁸ Taking the time during the first office visit to teach new puppy owners proper housebreaking techniques will make this process easier. During subsequent puppy visits, review the housebreaking process, and encourage owner efforts. Early intervention can help pets stay in their homes and create a strong human-animal bond.

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