

## HOUSETRAINING PUPPIES

Your home has just been blessed with a new puppy that arrived cuddly, warm, and ready to be loved. Unfortunately, he did not arrive housetrained.

Housetraining your new puppy can be easy and effective if you dedicate the necessary time and patience. A successful plan includes supervised confinement and encouragement. With these elements, most pups can be trained in a relatively short period of time.

### Getting the message across

If you want your puppy to eliminate outside, you must be aware of various conditions and activities that typically stimulate puppies to eliminate, including eating, drinking, playing and waking from naps. Learn to be aware of these activities and be alert that your puppy needs to eliminate. Begin to condition your puppy by using a command such as “out” as you take it outside. With time, your puppy will learn to signal if he has to go out.

The next step is to teach your puppy where you want him to eliminate. To accomplish this, you must accompany your puppy every time he goes outdoors. Choose a specific location with easy access. The area will soon become a familiar spot as the pup recognizes the odor from previous excursions. Mildly praise any sniffing or other pre-elimination behaviors and consider associating a unique training command such as “potty time” or “hurry up” with the act of eliminating. When your puppy eliminates, praise him heartily, offer a tasty food reward, or start playing. Your puppy will soon learn what is expected of him whenever he goes outside and hears the special command. As you begin housetraining, try to take your puppy outdoors every one to two hours. As he grows older and gets the hang of things, you can wait longer between outings.

### Scheduling puppy’s dinnertime

Controlling your puppy’s feeding schedule provides some control over his elimination schedule. Most will eliminate within a predictable time after eating, usually within the first hour. Because of this, it is best to avoid feeding a large meal just before confinement. Offer food two or three times each day at the same times, and make it available for no longer than 30 minutes. The last meal should be finished three to five hours before bedtime.

### Preventing mistakes

The most challenging part of the housetraining process is preventing your pup from eliminating indoors. Until he is housetrained, you will need to provide constant supervision. You should not consider your puppy housetrained until he has gone for at least four to eight consecutive weeks without eliminating anywhere in the home. Until your pup accomplishes this, keep him within eyesight of a family member 100 percent of the time. A leash is a handy tool to keep your puppy nearby when you are preoccupied and he might wander away.

When you are unable to provide constant supervision because you are busy, sleeping, or away from the home, confine your pup to a relatively small, safe area. Always take your puppy out to eliminate just before confinement. A wire or plastic crate provides an excellent area in which to confine your puppy when you cannot observe it. A crate has some limitations. Do not use it for longer than your puppy can physically control elimination or for more than four hours during the day. Most puppies will quickly adapt to the crate if you make training fun. Feeding in the crate, tossing toys inside for the pup to chase, and hiding treats in there should all encourage your puppy to look forward to being in the crate.

If your puppy is home alone each day for long periods, confine him to a larger area such as a small room or exercise pen. The area should provide enough space for him to eliminate if necessary and to rest several feet away from a mess. For easier cleaning, place paper at the sites where he is likely to eliminate. It is important to associate good things with the confinement area, rather than making it solely an isolation area. Spend some time in the area playing with your puppy or simply reading nearby as he rests there.

## Returning to the scene of the crime

To prevent your puppy from returning to previously soiled areas, remove urine and fecal odor with an effective commercial product. Saturate areas of soiled carpeting with odor-neutralizing products—merely spraying the surface is not as effective. If your puppy begins eliminating in certain areas of the home, deny access to these areas by closing doors to the rooms, using baby gates, or moving furniture over the soiled areas. Motion alarms will teach your puppy to avoid an area. Most pets avoid eliminating in areas where they eat or play. Feeding or placing water bowls, bedding, and toys in previously soiled areas can discourage elimination at those spots.

## Keeping your cool

No puppy has ever been housetrained without making a mistake or two. Be prepared for the inevitable. It does not help to become frustrated and harshly discipline your puppy. Punishment is the least effective and most overused approach to housetraining. A correction should involve nothing more than a mild, startling distraction and should be used only if you catch your puppy in the act of eliminating indoors. A quick stomp of the foot, loud clap, tug on the leash, or abrupt “No” (given with enough intensity to interrupt the behavior without frightening your puppy) is all that is necessary. Immediately take your pup to his elimination area outdoors to finish. A correction that occurs more than a few seconds after your puppy eliminates is useless because he will not understand why he is being corrected. If the punishment is too harsh, he may learn not to eliminate in front of you, even outdoors, and you run the risk of ruining the bond with your puppy. And don’t even think about rubbing his nose in a mess. There is absolutely nothing it will learn from this, except to be afraid of you.

Some pets will squat and urinate as they greet family members. Never scold them. This problem is due typically to either nervousness or excitement, and scolding will always make the problem worse.

With a little patience and a consistent approach, your puppy will be as housetrained as the rest of your family.

*The authors, Wayne L. Hunthausen, DVM and Gary M. Landsberg, DVM,  
Dipl. ACVB, are practicing veterinarians and pet behavior consultants.*