

SUBMISSIVE URINATION IN DOGS

Behavioral Disorders

OVERVIEW

Submissive urination can be a frustrating and embarrassing problem. Fortunately, it is often easily corrected. Shy, timid puppies are the most likely candidates for submissive urination but occasionally it persists into young adulthood. This problem is most common in female puppies under 1 year of age.

Situations that precipitate submissive urination include:

- Over affectionate greetings
- Guests entering your home
- Arguments between people
- Scolding
- Loud noises

Dogs are social animals that use subtle cues to maintain order and prevent disputes. In order to display deference to a more dominant individual, a submissive dog uses gestures such as averting her eyes, rolling on her back, and urinating. So when a dog feels intimidated or threatened, the appropriate response is to offer a submissive signal. These signals demonstrate that the dog recognizes another individual's dominance. The urination that occurs is not a spiteful act but a natural part of a dog's behavioral repertoire.

Before embarking on treatment for this problem, it is wise to contact your local veterinarian. He or she will perform a physical examination of your dog to rule out medical problems that may be contributing to the predicament. If medical problems are involved, your vet will discuss the various treatment options with you like surgery, drugs, and/or various coping strategies.

Note: Puppies become more confident as they grow older. Most puppies outgrow submissive urination before one year of age. Unfortunately, some owners inadvertently encourage the behavior by coddling their nervous youngster. Touching and praise, which you may believe are reassuring your puppy, are actually telling her, "Continue this behavior; I like it." Instead, try to ignore timid behavior and praise the puppy when she is acting more confidently.

TREATING SUBMISSIVE URINATION

There are two objectives in treating submissive urination: The first is to increase your dog's confidence, and the second is to avoid situations in which the behavior will occur until your puppy becomes more mature. Begin by observing which situations elicit the inappropriate urination behavior. Knowing these,

you can design a plan of action.

- Take your dog to non-confrontational training school. Click and treat training is best. A properly trained dog is usually more confident.
- Try to expose your dog to as many novel environments as possible. But remember, do not coddle. Praise the dog only when she shows confidence and explores the new environment.
- Encourage confidence by playing tug of war, retrieving games or play fighting.
- Scolding and punishment DO NOT WORK. They only make the dog feel more powerless and less in control.
- Do not loom over the dog, touch her nape, or make prolonged eye contact. These are all dominant signs and will be interpreted as such. Ask strangers to avoid greeting your dog or, alternatively, crouch down to the dog's level, avert their gaze, and gently encourage her to approach.
- Limiting your dog's intake of water when you know guests are coming over can sometimes help. Pick up the water bowl (and close the toilet bowl lids) 3 to 4 hours prior to their arrival. Caution: some dogs with medical problems that increase their thirst should never have water withheld. If in doubt, check with your veterinarian.

- If your dog urinates out of excitement when you return home and greet her, try to downplay the greeting by ignoring her for a few minutes until she calms down. If the problem occurs when friends greet her ask them to do this, too.

The above procedures help a great deal in avoiding urination *whoopsies* until the dog becomes more confident. Positive changes are usually seen in a few weeks, if not sooner. If submissive urination persists after 2 years of age, drug therapy can be instituted at the discretion of your veterinarian. And remember, be patient; accidents will happen.

Prevention is the easiest way to deal with submissive urination. The right style of obedience class can be an excellent confidence booster for your dog. Such classes can also open your eyes to the ways that you unconsciously reinforce a negative behavior, and will teach you the importance of well timed praise (and other rewards) in a healthy relationship with your dog.