

Accidents Happen

What to do if your adult dog has a lapse in houstraining

Susan Sarubin, Certified Professional Canine Behavior Consultant and Trainer

For the third time this week you've arrived home from work to find a puddle on the kitchen floor. On further investigation, you find a "present" on the cherished Oriental rug in the living room. Your well-behaved, fully houstrained canine family member is suddenly having "accidents" in the house. Why? Don't take it personally. You may think that your dog is "mad" at you for leaving her and exacting her revenge, or that she is just being lazy. But well-trained dogs don't suddenly start urinating or defecating in the house out of spite or laziness. There is a good reason for a sudden lapse in houstraining, and you will need to investigate the situation further to determine the cause.

As upsetting as "accidents" may be, it is not only unfair, but ineffective to punish a dog for an inability to control a body function. House soiling that suddenly occurs with a previously houstrained adult dog is caused by either environmental stressors or health-related issues, resulting in an inability of the dog to control elimination functions. Here are some causes to consider:

- 1) **Changes in your dog's home environment:** Moving to a new house, the arrival of a new baby, getting a puppy, a child leaving home, a divorce, death of a beloved owner, or losing a canine housemate, are stressful events for many dogs.
- 2) **Changes in your dog's routine:** Sometimes your schedule may change necessitating a change in routine for your dog as well. If she is accustomed to eating and going potty at certain times, she may have difficulty coping with any drastic change. Change routines gradually, if possible, so that your dog has time to adjust.
- 3) **Home remodeling or nearby construction:** Workmen coming and going, and the sounds of hammers, trucks, earthmovers, and jackhammers are as stressful to your dog as they are to you and may lead to house soiling problems.
- 4) **Fear of storms, thunder, or gun shots:** Even dogs who are not phobic (terrified) of thunder or the sound of gunfire may be anxious when hearing these noises, causing a loss of bladder control. Fear of storms often does not appear in dogs until middle-age.
- 5) **Separation anxiety/isolation distress:** Sometimes a difficult or traumatic change in a dog's life can trigger a fear of being left alone, or anxiety when not with the owner.
- 6) **Age-related diseases:** Canine cognitive dysfunction syndrome, kidney disease, and other diseases that affect senior and geriatric dogs may cause urinary incontinence or loss of bowel control.
- 7) **Hormonal incontinence:** A lack of estrogen in spayed, middle-aged, or senior female dogs may cause urinary incontinence. Lack of estrogen may result in a decrease in the muscle tone of the urethral sphincter.
- 8) **Other health issues:** Spinal cord injuries, urinary tract infections (common), tumors, kidney disease, and bladder problems may cause incontinence in dogs of any age. Some diseases, such as diabetes and Cushing's disease, may cause excessive drinking (polydipsia) leading to excessive urination (polyuria).
- 9) **Medication side effects:** Some medications may cause polydipsia and polyuria. Your veterinarian will know if increased urination is a side effect of any medication prescribed.

If your adult dog is suddenly having accidents in the house, the first step to helping your friend is to bring her to your veterinarian for a thorough physical examination. If there is a medical issue, your vet will recommend appropriate treatment or medication. If medical causes are ruled out, work with an experienced canine behavior professional to identify the stressors in your dog's environment that are causing the problem and to counsel you on the best methods to manage or eliminate those stressors,

alleviate your dog's anxiety, better manage your dog's environment, and modify her behavior.