

# Bow River Veterinary Centre

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## Houstraining for Puppies and Dogs

Learning to eliminate outdoors or only in a chosen area is a crucial skill for dogs!

By using positive reinforcement, consistency, and good supervision it is simple to houstraining most dogs. Houstraining is a habit of toileting in the right spots. Habits are formed by repeating the desired behavior over and over. Combining supervision and plenty of praise with a good plan will put your family on the road to having a successfully houstraining dog.



### When do I begin houstraining?

Start houstraining right away, or even before you bring home a new puppy or dog. Choose the area you want them to use for toileting and the door you wish them to go through to go out to the elimination area. If you will be using a special litter box or turf area on a patio or balcony, or another indoor latrine, consider where you want to keep it so you can easily supervise your dog's toilet habits.

Think about what you want your dog's adult habits to be and start teaching those habits right away. Using papers, potty pads, or other indoor elimination devices when you want your puppy to toilet outdoors as an adult can slow training. It is safe to take your puppy outdoors to eliminate, even at a very young age. Simply avoid areas where other dogs and wildlife also toilet.

Make sure to have a high-quality cleansing product on hand that is safe for your floors. No matter how successful your toilet training venture is, accidents or mistakes are **always** part of learning. Good cleanup is crucial after a mistake to discourage future toileting in the same spot; puppies and dogs have a strong sense of smell; and the odor of urine or feces is a cue to use this spot again in the future.

### How will I know that my puppy needs to go before it goes?

It takes time for puppies to grow up enough to hold their eliminations, learn what it feels like when they need "to go", learn to communicate to a human that they "need to go", and how to fully empty their bladder and bowels. Most puppies will pause activity, sniff, and sometimes circle before squatting or posturing to eliminate. Other puppies may act generally restless and agitated when they have a full bladder or bowel. Watch closely for these signs, so you can help your puppy be successful.

Patience is important!

Puppies and dogs will need an elimination break:

- during the night until they can hold their urine and feces overnight (usually between 2–5 months of age)
- after meals or big drinks of water
- immediately after waking up from a nap or sleeping
- during and after high energy times such as running and playing
- every 1–2 hours when awake **in addition to the times above**

Your puppy (or new dog) will need to be in one of three basic modes at all times:

- Directly supervised by a responsible human so that someone is always ready to respond to signals the puppy needs to "go" (e.g., tied to an observant person with a leash or within direct line-of-sight less than 10 feet or 3 meters away).
- Safely confined where the puppy will hold their elimination (crate, small pen, leashed to a person) to prevent mistakes.
- Safely confined where the puppy is allowed to eliminate at will (larger pen, fenced yard).



Using leashes, baby gates, and kennels or pens will make housetraining much easier because they prevent errors or learning a habit of eliminating in an unwanted area.

## **What are the goals of housetraining? Don't I just want my puppy to tell me when he needs to go?**

The goals of housetraining are to have your puppy:

- eliminate in the "right" areas
- eliminate immediately when asked
- communicate the need to eliminate
- eliminate on or off leash, and when you are near a person
- hold bladder and bowels when inside/not in the elimination area

## Can you provide me with easy to follow instructions to help me train my puppy's potty trips?

- **The Leash.** Take your puppy out on a leash to eliminate and always go along. Do not send puppies outside alone to toilet. Most puppies put outside alone will simply wait to return back inside with the family before eliminating. Set a timer for 2–5 minutes. Younger puppies will likely need to urinate at least twice to empty their bladders. Wait to give your puppy freedom in the yard until after they have eliminated. This will teach the puppy to toilet quickly first thing when you go outside. If your young puppy only eliminates once then wants to come back inside, watch for signs of another elimination soon, as often the puppy may not have fully emptied during a single elimination.
- **The Spot.** Take your puppy to the area you want them to eliminate when you suspect they need to do so. Wait 2–5 minutes, if they do not eliminate, return to what they were doing before but watch closely for signs like pause, sniff, and circle as a clue they might need to try to go again soon.
- **The Reward.** After your puppy toiles, quietly praise them and offer a small treat. Do this right near the area of elimination rather than when you get back inside. Remember, you want to reinforce the habit of eliminating outside being terrific – not the action of running away from the elimination area into the house.
- **The Cue.** Once you are familiar with your puppy's toilet sequence, begin introducing a cue. Wait quietly, and right before or when they begin to eliminate, say a word you want to associate with the behavior such as "Toilet," "Bathroom," "Potty," etc. Some families even have a separate word for urination and defecation.
- **Learning to "Ask."** As you learn what your puppy's signals are that they have a full bladder or bowel, you can show them how to "ask" to be let out. Many dogs will have a natural signal such as coming to the owner, staring at the owner, or barking or scratching at the designated exit door to the toilet area. Some owners even teach their dog to ring a bell attached to the door to be let out. Whether it is a natural signal or one you choose to teach, always praise your dog for giving you the signal with quiet, happy tones and immediately take them for a potty trip. For help with training a special cue like ringing a bell, speak with your veterinarian to get a list of recommended trainers in your neighborhood.
- **More Freedom.** As you and your puppy develop a routine of eliminating right away when they go outside, you will be able to allow the puppy more and more freedom during elimination trips. Use a longer lighter leash or line at first, and then you can fade the leash away if you wish. Send your puppy to the elimination spot and give the cue. Once your puppy eliminates, praise them quietly and return to prior activity, playtime in the yard, returning indoors, etc. Periodically practice toileting while wearing a leash even after your pet is trained; this is a valuable skill to have during travel, events, vet visits, and more!

## What should I do if my puppy makes mistakes and eliminates in the house?

If you are supervising your puppy and they start to eliminate indoors, interrupt them using a cheerful voice, clap your hands, whistle, etc. Guide your puppy quickly to the right spot and then praise them for finishing.

If you find a mistake after the fact, simply calmly and quietly clean the area, and resolve to better supervise your puppy in the future.

Do not punish your puppy for eliminating in the house or an unwanted area. Never rub a dog's nose in an elimination, strike or swat your puppy. Punishing your puppy for a natural act can make them think they should never toilet near a person.

**"Dogs who are punished during elimination may be taught to eliminate only far from humans or in secret."**

Being able to eliminate on a leash, and when asked, is crucial for maintaining the health of pets. It allows dog owners to monitor the frequency of urination and defecation, watch for changes in urine such as a strong odor or blood, know immediately if a dog is suffering from diarrhea, etc. Dogs who are punished during elimination may be taught to eliminate only far from humans or in secret. These dogs may even choose to toilet indoors but away from people in a hidden spot (e.g., behind the couch, under the bed, or in a closet in a spare room).

## What about marking?

Dogs normally use urine to mark their territory and send social signals. Preventing marking is done using the same techniques as general housetraining. Reversing marking requires plenty of direct supervision to prevent mistakes and lots of praise when the dog toiles outdoors. During housetraining, avoid allowing your dog to rehearse urinating on exterior walls, fences, fence posts, or other man-made objects as this will also discourage unwanted marking.

Dogs should be given the opportunity to mark outside on allowed items (bushes, trees, grasses, etc.) as this is a **normal** dog behavior.

## When can I start giving my puppy more freedom?

Once your puppy has gone 8–12 weeks without mistakes, they are probably ready for more freedom. This sounds like a long time! But puppies are babies, and they really do need constant supervision for success in housetraining, manners, safety from chewing or ingesting dangerous items, and so much more.

As you gradually allow your newly housetrained puppy or dog more freedom, consider allowing them to leave the room briefly without you. At first, watch from afar for any signals they might need to toilet. If you see a pause, sniff, circle, or other behavior that you have associated with need to eliminate, cheerfully call your puppy to the toileting routine and praise them once they go in the right spot. Over time, you will be able to trust your puppy with more and more freedom once they have learned where to toilet even when you are not watching. Investing lots of time when you first bring home your new puppy or dog will help assure you share a long relationship of not worrying about housetraining mistakes in the future.

If your previously well housetrained dog begins making mistakes, always consult your veterinarian for guidance.

In addition, if your puppy rolls on a hip or his back and urinates when greeting people, when people pet or reach over him, or when he is very excited, consult your veterinarian for advice. These types of elimination will not be changed with basic housetraining techniques and require more detailed support to achieve success.