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Submissive Urination

By Dr. Ilana Reisner

Submissive urination can occur when your dog is excited and may especially appear when greetings are rowdy.

Stopping this Submissive Behavior

Your dog is a deeply loved and cherished pet, a card-carrying member of your family. He is treated with kindness and warmth and you've taken pains to walk him regularly for his exercise and bathroom needs. Why, then, does he squat and urinate in the house when you come home from work each day?

The answer to this question probably has nothing to do with fear, confusion, or lack of housetraining but rather is rooted in your dog's natural behavior. Seen typically during excited greetings and when dogs are scolded, submissive urination is best managed by avoiding these situations.

Although submissive urination is certainly undesirable, it is a normal canine behavior. Dogs and wolves are group-living animals whose social systems are based on a dominance hierarchy. They use an elaborate system of body language to communicate with each other and facilitate harmonious co-existence within the group. When your dog squats and urinates, he is unambiguously stating that you're his leader (at the time, anyway) and he's deferring to you. Under normal circumstances, higher-ranking wolves (or humans) won't continue to challenge a submissive family member who engages in this behavior.

The Body Language of Submissiveness

Why all of this talk of challenges and submissiveness when all you've done is reach out to pet your dog? The reason is that canine body language is, inconveniently, sometimes the opposite of your own. When you make direct eye contact and stoop down over your dog, reaching out to him from above, you may be trying to say "hello" in your own language but to the dog you're actually asserting your higher rank.

Because your dog may be more sensitive to this "display" than other dogs, he may naturally respond with a physical display of lower rank: a crouched posture, a tucked but wagging tail, squatting hindquarters, ears laid back, and his eyes and head turned to the side.

Unfortunately, urination is also a component of this display – especially when dogs are desperate to signal their submissiveness (a common response when dogs are punished). Submissive urination may also occur when your dog is excited and, therefore, may especially appear when greetings are rowdy, rather than mellow.

Avoiding Situations That Lead to Submissive Urination

What can you do about your dog's submissive urination? Clearly, punishment is the worst possible strategy and is likely to exacerbate the problem. In fact, any anger or frustration may impel your dog to urinate even greater efforts to appease you. If your dog urinates while greeting you, try to ignore him completely as you enter the door. Alternatively, because running is incompatible with submissiveness, you might toss him his favorite toy as you walk into the house (keep a favorite handy by the door) or simply call him outside to urinate.

Try to avoid any physical displays of dominance, including prolonged eye contact, bending over your dog, and petting from above, that – in your dog's language – might be interpreted as challenges. Luckily, submissive urination is most often seen in puppies and young adults and most dogs eventually outgrow the behavior.



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