

Dr. Becker Discusses Incontinence in Pets

By Dr. Karen Becker

Hi, this is Dr. Karen Becker, and today we're going to discuss incontinence. There are actually two types of incontinence: urinary and fecal. Urinary incontinence is the involuntary leakage of urine. Fecal incontinence is the inability of a dog or cat to control his bowels.

Urinary Incontinence

Involuntary passage of urine normally occurs while your pet is asleep or resting. When she stands, you can notice urinary leakage. It can be just a small wet spot, or it can be a very good-sized puddle.

It's important to understand that your pet is not intentionally leaking urine. She has no control over what's happening. It's not a behavioral problem; it's a medical issue. Trying to correct or punish your pet is a really bad idea. It's very important to treat urinary dribbling as a medical problem requiring a medical diagnosis, rather than a behavioral problem.

There are many causes for urinary leaking, including trauma to the central nervous system, damage to the pudendal nerve (which is the nerve that works the neck of the bladder), diseases of the bladder, kidney, and adrenal glands (for instance, Cushing's disease, hypothyroidism, and diabetes), as well as bladder stones, birth defects, urethral obstruction. As well as age-related urinary incontinence, hormone imbalances, and feline leukemia – all can cause urinary dribbling.

Hormone-Induced Urinary Incontinence

Hands down, the most common reason for involuntary urine leakage, especially in dogs, is hormone-induced urinary incontinence. After a pet is spayed or neutered, the sex hormones, estrogen and testosterone (which are necessary to help close the external urethral sphincter), are no longer available. This often results in urine dribbling.

Hormone-induced urinary incontinence is extremely common in spayed female dogs and somewhat less common in neutered male dogs. These are typically very healthy, vibrant pets that just happen to dribble urine anywhere from multiple times a day to just once or twice a year.

A common hormonal drug called DES, diethylstilbestrol, was pulled from the market about five years ago because it was linked to diseases like diabetes and cancer in dogs. Unfortunately, the drug did reappear on the market a few years ago. Because of its overall systemic risk to health, I never recommend using this drug.

Another commonly prescribed drug for urinary incontinence is called PPA. And PPA is substantially safer than DES.

The biggest problem with these drugs is that many vets put dogs on them without investigating the cause of the urine dribbling. They just assume that it must be hormone-induced urinary incontinence. Often, I see dogs on these drugs, who, when I run tests on them, have a disease process that's causing the leaking. For instance, urinary crystals or bladder stones, Cushing's, diabetes, or kidney disease all could be present.

Treating Urinary Incontinence

The cause of your pet's urinary incontinence will dictate what treatment she receives. If there's an underlying disease process or structural abnormality causing the problem, then it can be corrected through medical or surgical management. If your pet is diagnosed with hormone-induced urinary incontinence, I strongly recommend that you try to treat the problem naturally, because some of the drugs used to treat urinary incontinence, specifically DES, are potentially toxic, with a whole lot more side effects than it's really worth.

I successfully treat cases of hormone-induced urinary incontinence with glandular therapy, including Standard Process glandulars – Symplex F for female dogs and Symplex M for male dogs – as well as natural, biologically appropriate (which means non-synthetic) hormone replacement therapy.

Synthetic hormone replacement drugs can cause some of the same problems in female dogs as they do in women who take them. Natural plant-based hormone therapy is compounded for your pet's specific hormone imbalances based off of sex hormone blood tests.

I also use a few excellent herbal remedies, including corn silk, lemon balm, and horse tail. There are also some great nutraceuticals specifically formulated to help with incontinence. I also frequently use acupuncture to stimulate the pudendal nerve. Chiropractic can also do a great job of keeping the central nervous system lined up and working appropriately.

Dogs with incontinence that can't be completely resolved can be fitted with doggy bloomers or panties with absorbent pads. You can even use human disposable diapers, and just cut a hole out for the tail if that does fit your pet's body shape. Just remember that urine is caustic and should not remain on your pet's skin for very long. It's important that if you use diapers, you're changing them regularly and disinfecting your pet's skin.

Fecal Incontinence

Fecal incontinence is almost always due to the colon and brain not communicating effectively. The nerves that control the colon are supposed to send the message via the nerves and the spinal cord to the brain, signaling it's time to go outside. If there's a problem with the lower back – for example, degenerative myelopathy, peripheral myopathy, arthritis, muscle weakness, atrophy, a spinal tumor, or a condition such as myasthenia gravis – the communication pathway is compromised, and the animal isn't aware that nature's calling.

In older pets, the anal sphincter can lose its ability to hold in feces efficiently as well. Parasites can also contribute to fecal incontinence. If you have a pet that has diarrhea for an extended period of time, there can also be damage to the muscles of the rectum, which can lead to the problem as well.

Other causes of fecal incontinence can include an abscess or infection of the anal glands, a dietary issue, medications, or a perianal fistula.

Owners of pets with fecal incontinence might find accidents around the house. Or the pet could inadvertently poop when he uses his abdominal muscles. Let's say, when he goes from a lying position to a standing position, getting up on a couch, or a similar situation where they're engaging their ab muscles, like climbing the stairs.

Your dog or cat may also poop while walking without knowing she's doing it or sometimes during sleep. There can also be excessive gas and swelling of the abdomen in cases of fecal incontinence.

It is important to find the underlying cause of your pet's fecal incontinence. Your vet will want to do a complete blood profile – including a chemistry profile, CBC, urinalysis, and a fecal analysis – to check for the presence of an infection or parasites. Sometimes, additional diagnostics such as X-rays may be required to check for a spinal arthritis or a bone tumor.

Both chiropractic and acupuncture – I use electroacupuncture in my practice – can be very helpful in these cases. Aligning the vertebral bodies and stimulating the nerve fibers that communicate between the colon and the brain can help reduce incidences of fecal incontinence.

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