

When your pet doesn't urinate normally

Normal urination is a complex process that requires a structurally normal urinary tract as well as coordination of mental awareness, nerve function, and muscle relaxation and contraction. When some part of the process fails, your pet may become incontinent or have difficulty urinating.

Urinary incontinence

If your dog or cat is incontinent, it's probably dribbling urine around the house or in its bedding. In incontinent animals, urine leaks because the bladder doesn't store urine properly or the urethra (a tube that carries urine from the bladder to the exterior) isn't functioning correctly. The most common cause of urinary incontinence is urethral weakness, which is usually easily treated (more about that below). Other causes of urinary incontinence include nerve or muscle damage, sometimes due to trauma; anatomic abnormalities; metabolic disorders; stones or tumors in the urinary tract; urinary tract infections; feline leukemia virus infection in cats; and prostate disease.

Dogs and cats of any age or breed can become incontinent, but dogs are more susceptible to this problem. Spayed or neutered pets are at a greater risk for incontinence (but the benefits of spaying or neutering still far outweigh the risk of incontinence). Animals may be incontinent from birth, or incontinence may appear with age or obesity.

Straining to urinate

If your cat spends a lot of time in its litter box or your dog's urine is a mere trickle, your pet may be straining to urinate. In these pets, urinating may be painful (and you may think your pet is constipated). Pets that can't urinate adequately may vomit or stop eating.

In pets that strain to urinate, the bladder doesn't empty completely and becomes overdistended. The most common causes of this problem are an obstruc-

tion and bladder overdistention due to anatomic abnormalities, inflammation, stones or mucus plugs, cancer, prostate disease, or nerve damage or muscle dysfunction. Cats with feline lower urinary tract disease or dogs with urinary tract infections may also strain to urinate.

What your veterinarian will do

After taking your pet's history, your veterinarian will perform a complete physical examination, including urinalysis and, possibly, blood tests. Your veterinarian may also place a catheter in your pet's urethra or perform radiography, ultrasonography, or cystoscopy (using a special scope to see inside the lower urinary tract). In some cases, exploratory surgery or additional specialized tests may be needed to reach a diagnosis.

Treatment varies based on what's causing the urination problem. Urinary tract infections are treated with antibiotics. If your pet has urinary incontinence associated with urethral weakness, your veterinarian may prescribe estrogen supplementation or another medication. Other drugs can be used to enhance bladder storage or relax the bladder and urethra.

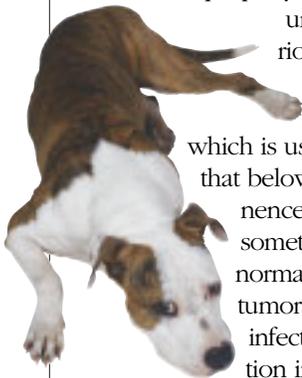
Your veterinarian likely will recommend surgery to correct anatomic abnormalities, remove bladder stones, and treat some prostate diseases. In animals not used for breeding, neutering is the preferred treatment for most prostate disorders.

If your pet has a spinal injury or similar nerve damage, its bladder may need to be emptied manually, and your veterinarian can teach you how to do this. Pets with bladder overdistention and urine retention may need a urinary catheter until the bladder can function on its own. Since urine retention can lead to urinary tract infections, antibiotic therapy may also be needed. Pets with feline lower urinary tract disease or urinary stones may need a diet change as well.

Response to treatment

Your pet's response to treatment will depend on the cause of the urination problem. Many pets regain normal urination. But occasional relapses shouldn't be considered treatment failure. Sporadic episodes of incontinence are often related to strenuous exercise, periods of excessive water intake, or a full bladder after a period of prolonged confinement.

If your pet doesn't respond to treatment, let your veterinarian know. ■



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