



Basic Potty-Training Guide

Potty training refers to the process of teaching a dog to consistently eliminate outdoors. When taking a dog home from the shelter, it's important to recognize that because dogs in a shelter environment often have variable schedules day-to-day, they may not have gotten consistent opportunities to practice going to the bathroom outdoors. Adopters should plan to allow their newly adopted dogs a consistent potty-training schedule as soon as they get home to set them up for success!

Routine is your biggest ally! At least for the first few weeks, be as consistent as possible with the following:

- Feeding times
- Regular potty breaks
- Walks/exercise routines
- Your absences
- Snacks/enrichment timing

First thing in the morning, make sure to leash your dog up **as soon as they get up (or exit the crate) and go straight outside to an appropriate potty spot.** Hold the leash and ignore your dog – be a tree, stand neutrally/stationary, and wait. As soon as your dog goes to the bathroom, YAY!!! Give them a treat, play with them, praise them, anything that signals they are being strongly rewarded right after they go to the bathroom.

- **Pro Tip:** *You may need to adjust your reward based on your dog!* For example, if your dog is more timid, praising them enthusiastically might startle them. Tailor your approach to what YOUR dog prefers!

Make sure to also give potty breaks after any meals, after water, after nap time, after indoor play, and after crating them for any period. On these potty breaks, go outside on leash, ignore your dog, treat/praise/play when they do go to the bathroom. If they do not go to the bathroom after 5-10 minutes of waiting in the potty spot, bring them back inside. See if you can give them an activity (play, enrichment, even naptime) before trying again.

- **Pro Tip:** Make sure to wait to reward them until the moment *after they finish* going to the bathroom, so that they are not interrupted!

Especially at first, **try to set up scenarios where you can monitor your dog.** Feel free to keep the leash on while indoors) and supervise them (when they are not confined to a crate). You may choose to close the door to the room you are in with them so they cannot move to another part of the house alone and potty – it only takes a few seconds unsupervised!

- **Pro Tip:** It is important to not close your dog in a crate if they are not comfortable in there at this stage. Instead, you can bring your dog inside and confine them to an area using an ex-pen or supervise them, set them up with a bed and some enrichment (which may include an OPEN crate), and try again later. See our ***Crate Training handout*** for additional help with this process!

Pay attention to body language! There are lots of signals that our dogs can use (either inadvertently or on purpose!) to show us that they need to “go.” Watch for ones that might be unique to your dog and try to encourage them by preemptively responding by going out! Some common signs include:

- Pacing/sniffing the ground
- Standing by/whining at the door
- Walking around purposefully with a low head

Potty accidents indoors should be ignored rather than punished. Punishing accidents is ineffective and can create fearful associations with you and/or going potty. It can also cause dogs to hide indoor elimination in less-frequented rooms or areas of the home, to eliminate behind furniture, or to eliminate whenever humans are not present. It is then possible that you will have few to no opportunities to reward elimination in the correct place because the dog may no longer feel comfortable eliminating in your presence.

All potty accidents should be promptly and properly cleaned with an enzymatic cleaner to eliminate the enzymes in potty spots that will attract dogs back to the same place. Even products which are advertised to eliminate pet odor may not be completely effective: look for the word “enzymatic.” We recommend products like Anti-Icky Poo (our favorite, available online) or Nature’s Miracle (available at most pet supply stores).

“Help! My dog won’t potty outside! Even if we are out for hours, they potty as soon as they get back indoors!” This is a common challenge and can be very frustrating! The most common cause for this *behavior is a dog who does not feel comfortable eliminating outdoors*. Whether it is due to fear, overexcitement, noise sensitivity, or hypervigilance to stimuli like cars or other dogs, the outdoors doesn’t feel safe/comfortable for this vulnerable activity. Thankfully there is one simple tool that can help:

Foraging. AKA, snuffling food/treats out of a substrate like grass. While it may seem simple, most dogs who struggle with outdoor elimination benefit greatly from this exercise.

- For your potty breaks/walks, pick a CALM, QUIET area outdoors where you have access to a substrate like grass, where you can safely scatter treats on the ground, or where you can place a snuffle mat.
- Scatter some food your dog will be motivated to search for, first in an easy small area, then gradually increasing the radius of the scatter.
- Wait! As unbelievable as it might seem, after a few minutes of consistent foraging many dogs will seem to “automatically” use the bathroom. This is because sniffing lowers a dog’s heart rate and can help them physically relax enough to “go.”

- Be consistent and stick with it! Some dogs take many sessions to become comfortable enough to “go,” where others might get it on the first try. In the meantime, set up an area with potty pads or a grass strip inside by the door for ease of cleanup as your pup learns.

Marking. If you are seeing your dog consistently “mark” (that is, deposit small amounts of urine in multiple locations around the home even if they have already relieved themselves outdoors), you are seeing a behavior that has less to do with the need to go, and everything to do with instinctive scent communication. While this is a bit different from general potty training, it can be a nuisance! Here are some tips for dealing with this behavior:

- **Confine your dog to certain areas** which are easier to clean
- **Consider spay/neuter status.** Especially in males, neutering can help decrease (if not completely eliminate) marking behaviors
- **Consider a belly band** for when you are not able to supervise
- Work especially to **create a strong history of rewards for “going” outside**

Additional resources: A great guide that goes into detail about all things potty training is Patricia McConnell’s book, ***Way to Go: How to House-train a Dog of Any Age***. It is a very short book (about 20-25 pages), available on Amazon!