

Urinary incontinence

Urinary incontinence means the 'loss of ability to control of urination' and can be caused by a variety of diseases. Incontinence is quite common in dogs but is usually more of a nuisance to the owners, than a cause of distress to their pet. Urinary incontinence is more common in females than males because of the anatomical differences in the urinary tract - especially the shorter urethra in the female. It is rarely seen in cats.

Causes

- Some animals are born with abnormalities in the urinary tract.
- Others develop problems later in life - neutered bitches are more at risk of developing urethral problems.
- In entire male dogs, incontinence is often related to prostatic disease.
- Sometimes back problems can cause pressure on the nerves to the bladder resulting in incontinence.
- Some breeds and types of dog are more at risk of developing incontinence.
- The most common cause of urinary incontinence is urethral sphincter mechanism incompetence (USMI). This is most often seen in female, large breed dogs. In animals with USMI incontinence most often occurs when the dog is lying down.

Signs

You may see urine dripping from your dog's vulva or penis or, more likely, you will find wet patches where your dog has been lying. Sometimes there are only tiny wet patches or the bed may be soaked. Often the urine is quite dilute and might not smell very strongly.

Dribbling of urine after urination is more often seen with infections (like cystitis), cancers and abnormal development of the ureters (ectopic ureters).

Diagnosis

The age of your pet when you first noticed the problem often provides a useful clue as to the cause of the incontinence.

It is important for your vet to have an accurate description of what the incontinence is like in your dog - so try to explain clearly what signs you have noticed. If your dog appears to be straining without passing any urine they may have a blockage or irritation in the bladder (cystitis) or urethra (urethritis).

A full physical examination will help to rule out potential causes of incontinence.

Your vet will need a urine sample from your dog to send for tests in case there is an infection. Routine blood screens are useful to rule out other diseases, particularly those resulting in excessive drinking which may make the incontinence worse.

Further tests

X-rays may help your vet to identify anatomical abnormalities in the ureters and bladder. In many cases of urinary incontinence x-rays are normal (but it is still important that they are done to ensure nothing serious or treatable is missed).

Ultrasonography can also be helpful in assessing for ectopic ureters, bladder cancers, anatomical defects and chronic thickening of the bladder wall associated with trauma or infection.

If your vet has ruled out medical and structural problems they may want to try some treatment to see if the incontinence can be controlled.

Treatment

The treatment for urinary incontinence depends on the cause. A specific treatment plan should be worked out for individual cases. If an underlying condition is identified then this should be managed appropriately. If your dog has a number of problems that increase its chance of being incontinent, then removal of just one of them may be sufficient to resolve the problem. Urinary tract infections must be treated and anatomical abnormalities, eg ectopic ureters, can be corrected by an operation.

The most common cause of incontinence in bitches is a weakness in the outflow from the bladder (called USMI). There are some drugs that can help to tone up the muscle in the urethra and make the seal better. These medications may need to be continued permanently but if this is the case the minimum effective dose must be found.

Long term outlook

If your dog has USMI and starts on medical treatment that controls the signs it is likely that they will need to continue to receive this treatment for the rest of their life. Your vet will want to monitor your pet's progress and will adjust the dose of treatment as needed