

DOG INCONTINENCE TREATMENT - A VETERINARIAN'S VIEW

There is no “one size fits all” treatment for incontinence. Treatment will be most effective when a proper diagnostic workup is performed.

Urethral sphincter mechanism incontinence (USMI) is most common in spayed female dogs due to hormonal imbalances. This happens when the muscle which keeps urine in the bladder becomes weakened.

There is no specific test for USMI---we diagnose it by ruling out other urinary problems. Dogs with USMI typically have no other symptoms and urine tests are normal.

The primary treatments for USMI are Proin (phenylpropanolamine) and Incurin (estradiol). Some dogs respond better to one medication over another. Proin tightens the sphincter muscle. It is usually given 2 times daily. It is generally safe, but dogs who are overly sensitive to it may have signs of restlessness, high blood pressure, fast heart rate or stomach upset.

Proin comes in a chewable tablet and some dogs really like the taste—make sure to keep the bottle out of reach of curious dogs! The side effects are much more serious in cases of toxicity or overdose.

If your dog’s incontinence doesn’t resolve on Proin, I usually recommend Incurin, an estrogen replacement medication. In the past, DES (diethylstilbestrol) was prescribed, but safety issues in humans drastically reduced its availability. DES also has some risky side effects in dogs, such as bone marrow suppression.

In my experience, Incurin is very well-tolerated. At the doses needed for incontinence, serious side effects are rare. A very small percentage of dogs may have hormonal side effects such as vulvar swelling or mammary development. Every dog is started on a daily dose of Incurin which is gradually reduced every 7 days. Some dogs can get by with only 1-2 doses per week!

There are some dogs that require a combination of both Proin and Incurin. Because they work differently, it safe to give them together. There are no cures for USMI, so treatment with either medication usually lifelong.

Other treatment options have been explored for dogs with severe USMI that are resistant to medical treatment. Various surgeries that alter the conformation of the urinary tract have proved minimally successful. Collagen injections administered around the urethra can help resist urine leakage.

While initially effective for most dogs, the injections often need to be repeated over time. These are usually last-resort measures for the most severely affected dogs.

For other causes of incontinence, you need to treat the underlying disease and the leakage resolves.

Urinary tract infections should be treated with appropriate antibiotics, often based on urine culture/sensitivity test results. This test tells us what antibiotic will be best for the specific infection present. Bladder stones often need to be surgically removed, but can sometimes be dissolved with special prescription diets.

Some diseases cause 'overflow' incontinence because they dilute the urine. The bladder cannot physically hold the amount of urine present and leaks as a result.

Diabetes, kidney disease, and adrenal disease are the most common examples. Some medications can cause increased urine production as well. Bloodwork, urine testing, and other specialized tests are required to diagnose these conditions.

Because dogs with these conditions lose a lot of water through their urine, it is extremely important that they are able to drink plenty of water to maintain proper hydration. **Please do NOT restrict water in the hopes of decreasing incontinence!!** Once the condition is properly managed, the incontinence should resolve.

Due to their anatomy, male dogs rarely develop incontinence.

When infection, bladder stones, prostate problems, and underlying internal diseases are ruled out, we try Proin therapy to increase urethral muscle tone. Unfortunately, male dogs do not always respond to Proin as reliably as female dogs.

Older dogs or dogs with severe irreversible nerve damage can develop incontinence that is not always responsive to medical therapies.

In these cases, we need to manage the condition with supportive nursing care including diapers and absorbent pads. Change diapers often and keep your pet's skin clean to prevent urine scald, which can be painful and lead to infections.

For female dogs, it is beneficial to use medicated wipes around their vulvar region to prevent infections from ascending up to their bladder.

Fecal incontinence is rare and generally only seen in dogs with severe neurologic disease, tails docked too short, or advanced senility.

There are no treatments for fecal incontinence itself, but to help manage the problem I usually recommend a low-residue diet to reduce fecal volume, doggy diapers, and good sanitary measures.

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