

Inappropriate Elimination / House soiling

What is inappropriate elimination, or house soiling, and why does it happen?

Inappropriate elimination occurs whenever a cat urinates or defecates away from the litter box in a place that's unacceptable to the owners, and may be due to medical or behavioral issues. Medical problems that cause discomfort in the litter box, (such as arthritis, constipation and/or anal gland problems, and bladder problems including infections, inflammation, crystals and stones) may cause cats to avoid the place they associate with that discomfort. Conditions that cause an increased volume of urine (like chronic kidney disease or diabetes) or reduced mobility (arthritis) can also lead to misses due to an inability to get to the box in time. Also, dementia in older cats can cause enough confusion to contribute to house soiling. The first diagnostic step is to rule out these medical causes with an exam, a urinalysis, and possibly blood work.

After medical problems are ruled out, we'll discuss the potential behavioral causes which fall into several categories:

- Litter aversion
- Litter box location aversion
- Surface / substrate preference
- Location preference
- Territorial marking
- Separation anxiety and other stresses

Correcting the problem will involve identifying the causes, and treating or addressing those causes that can be helped. Essentially, treatment involves identifying litter box problems, contributing stresses, preferences of the individual cat, making the litter box more attractive to the cat, making the areas being soiled less attractive to the cat, removing the odors from previous urine and stool incidents, behavior modification therapy, pheromone therapy, and finally, drugs if needed. Factors that will affect the success rate in treatment include duration of the problem (the shorter the better), number of cats in the household (the fewer the better), and the ability to actually identify and relieve stresses.

Why would a cat not like its litter box?

Cats may dislike any one of several aspects of their litter boxes, including the level of cleanliness, litter type, litter scents, box size and location, presence or absence of a hood, and ease of access.

- Inadequate cleaning – few cats are going to tolerate a dirty litter box, and some cats are very picky about it. A few cats may expect to have separate boxes for urine and stool, and may have no tolerance for sharing with others.
- Litter type: most cats prefer clumping litter, presumably because it is more comfortable to step, stand and dig in. Not all cats agree though, and trial and error may help find the right match for your cat.
- Litter scents: most cats prefer not to use multiple cat formula litters which have added scents. These scents are really there for the benefit of human noses, not cat noses, and cats may actually strongly dislike some of the odors, particularly citrus or lemon grass. One “scented” litter that may be beneficial is Cat Attract, which can help get reluctant box users back in the fold.
- Box size: generally speaking, the bigger the better and some large cats may be better served with under-the-bed plastic storage drawers which have bigger footprints than even large litter boxes.
- Box location: avoiding noisy/hectic locations is best. This includes the laundry room, the bathroom, and areas near a central vacuum system. Stairs and pet doors, and hooded litter boxes with the entry in the top may present serious access problems to some cats, especially those with arthritis or other mobility issues. Automatic self-cleaning litter boxes can cause aversion if the cat needs to use the box just as it's starting to clean itself, and the collection trays can get quite gross if you're not paying attention.
- Hooded litter boxes hold odors in, which is appreciated by some cat owners, but not by many cats. Also, hoods can give mischievous or aggressive cats an opportunity to ambush another cat in the box, causing the ambush victim to

avoid the hooded box in the future. This can be true also if the box is in a small, confined space like a closet or under a counter top or in an open cabinet.

- You can only clean the litter box as well as your schedule and energy allow, but if your cat is missing the box, they may be telling you it's not clean enough. Another strategy for keeping the box cleaner is to increase the number of boxes available - generally it's a good idea to have one more box than the number of cats in the household.
- Sometimes nothing about the box has changed but the cat's opinion of it has anyway. They may have been tolerating something that they didn't really like and then one day they are no longer tolerant. If the cause is not obvious, it may be necessary to change several aspects for the better to find the right arrangement for your specific cat.

What stresses can cause inappropriate elimination?

There are many potential causes of stress to cats, mostly involving change of some kind, including moving to a new house, a new person or pet in the house, a person or pet that has recently left the home, a new piece of furniture or rearranging the furniture, a new cat outside in the neighborhood that can be seen by the indoor cat, or restricting a previously outdoor cat to indoors only. Changing the cat food can be very stressful to them. Also, any punishment rendered on a cat for house soiling usually only makes things worse because it is another source of stress for the cat, and sets up an ongoing adversarial situation that can snowball. Any of these stresses can lead to inappropriate elimination.

What kinds of preferences can affect a cat's use of the litter box?

Some cats may come to prefer another location or surface type for elimination even though there is nothing really objectionable about their litter box arrangement. For example, a cat who starts eliminating on linoleum and hardwood floors, and in the bathtub, might be signaling a preference for smooth, hard surfaces. Unfortunately, carpeting is often the preferred surface. A cat that consistently goes in a particular corner in one room may have a location preference. Preferences like these may need to be honored to some degree, for example by providing a litter box without any litter in it in the first case. In the latter case, a box can be placed in the cat's preferred location and then very gradually moved in the direction of a more acceptable location for you.

How do I make the litter box more attractive to the cat?

- Since even well-cleaned litter boxes can have odors deep in the plastic, try a brand new box, preferably without a hood, and the bigger the better. Most cats find a hooded litter box smelly and scary. You can also use a large plastic storage bin with a cut-out for easy access, or a large under-the-bed storage drawer, to increase the footprint of the litter box. Large cats in particular may need a bigger footprint than you can find in the litter box marketplace.
- Use non-scented clumping litter which cats usually find more desirable than other types. Offering a choice of different litter types in different boxes allows the cat to vote for their own preference. Scoop the litter box daily and completely change the litter weekly. Wash the box with soap and water once a month. Avoid using highly-scented cleansers, as well as scented cat litters.
- Increasing the number and location of boxes can only help. It is recommended to have 1 litter box per cat plus one extra. There should be at least 1 litter box on each floor and they should be in open areas (so the cat can see around and won't feel vulnerable to ambush). Avoid dark, damp and noisy areas like next to the washing machine, toilets and central vacuum systems. The noisy appliances may scare cats off from using the litter box.
- Keep the existing litter box in the normal location and add a new one near the area of inappropriate urination. After the new box has been in use for several days, move it 3 – 6 inches per day back toward a more desired location. The faster you move it, the more likely the cat is to abandon it again. You may find that the cat refuses to follow it into a particular room, in which case aversion to that room may have been the problem in the first place.
- Try using Cat Attract brand cat litter which does seem to be successful in attracting cats back to the litter box in many cases.

How do I make the inappropriate sites less attractive to the cat?

The areas where the house soiling is occurring may continue to be misused in the same way unless the urine and stool odors are eliminated, and then those areas are made less attractive to the cat one way or another. Keep in mind that discouraging the misuse of the current location can lead the cat to misuse of others areas instead, particularly if the litter box arrangement is not redesigned more to the cats liking.

- Neutralizing the odor of urine or stool in the inappropriate places is an important step. If the area is on carpeting, you'll need to soak the carpet thoroughly enough to reach the underlying pad which will also retain the odor. Useful products include Anti-Icky-Poo, F.O.N., and Nature's Miracle.
- Cats usually don't like citrus odors so placing a lemon-scented air freshener in the area being used inappropriately can help.
- Try placing a cat bed or food bowl in the problem area. Cats rarely eliminate near a sleeping or eating location.
- Cover the area(s) with aluminum foil or an upside down carpet protector (for under an office chair but with the nubby side up). Most cats will not walk on either of these products.
- If the cat is digging in potted plant containers, cover the soil with decorative gravel or a plant pot cover, or aluminum foil, or place a lemon scented air freshener nearby.

What about disciplining or punishing the cat for this behavior?

Any attempt to discipline a cat is likely to backfire. If you're angry at the cat, they're likely to be angry and/or scared themselves. This will make stress-related behavior worse, especially if you put the cat in their litter box while yelling at them. Successfully working through one of these problems requires great patience and a certain amount of tolerance. In the long run it will be more effective to reward good behaviors than to punish bad.

What drugs, and other aids are used?

If and when needed, several kinds of drugs can be tried, including:

- Pheromones such as Feliway plug-in or spray (though not drugs, strictly speaking)
- Anti-depressant and/or anti-anxiety medication such as fluoxetine (Reconcile, Prozac), clomipramine (Clomicalm), amitriptyline (Elavil), or buspirone
- Tranquilizers, including diazepam and Phenobarbital

What is territorial marking?

Territorial marking involves spraying of urine on vertical surfaces and is most common in un-neutered cats, but it can also occur with neutered males, and occasionally females. Usually the cat doing the marking will back up to the wall or other vertical surface, hold their tail up and wiggle it while simultaneously squirting urine onto that surface. It's not uncommon for cats to hold their tails up and wiggle it similarly but without any spraying. They're not "trying" to spray, it is just a gesture and is not a problem.

The more cats that are sharing a home, or that are visible outside through the windows and sliders, the more likely marking behavior is. If spraying is in response to outside cats, it is often right around the windows and doors and sliders that the outside cats are viewed from. Finding a way to keep the outdoor cats away from your house (with a motion detecting garden hose controller, for example) or to block the view out the windows and sliders will help. If spraying is in response to tension between cats within your home, you may need to reduce the population via rehoming, or identify and separate the hostile parties. Feliway can be very helpful, and drugs can be needed in some cases.

What is separation anxiety?

House soiling sometimes happens in response to a cat missing a particular family member to whom they are overly attached. This is sometimes on the owner's bed or favorite sitting places. These cats may also be excessively vocal in their owner's absence and may be more destructive than normal. Behavior modification, desensitization, Feliway and drugs can all play a part in managing this condition.

What's the bottom line?

When a cat is routinely urinating or defecating away from the litter box, the sooner it's diagnosed the sooner it can be helped. If there is something causing physical pain during urination or defecation, it should be diagnosed and treated first because no amount of litter box manipulation or anti-anxiety medication, or (heaven forbid) anger - will make that better. Remember that the better you can make the litter box, from the cat's perspective, the fewer inappropriate elimination problems you're likely to have to contend with in the long run.

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