

LITTERBOX BLUES

Many people think cats are extremely clean and easy to houstrain. Most of the time, you can easily train your cat by selecting litter that appeals to him, placing the litter box in an easily accessible location, and keeping the litter box clean. But enough cats have problems with housesoiling that it is the primary behavior problem reported by cat owners.

Two Types of House Soiling

A cat is “marking” when he sprays urine on vertical objects such as furniture, plants, or walls. In rare cases, cats may mark with urine or stools on horizontal surfaces. Marking may stem from territorial behavior or be brought on by stress. Feline inappropriate elimination is a term that describes a cat’s elimination in places other than his litter box. Cats do this either because they are avoiding the litter box or because they prefer to eliminate in other locations.

Rule Out Medical Problems First

Housesoiling can have an underlying medical cause. Diseases that increase the frequency of urination, such as kidney disease or diabetes, and/or disease that make urination painful, such as bladder disease or arthritis, can lead to housesoiling and litter avoidance. Similarly, diseases that lead to an increase in stools or discomfort during defecation can contribute to housesoiling with feces. Hormonal disturbances (such as thyroid disease) and any disease that affects the nervous system (e.g., tumors, senility) can also lead to housesoiling. If your cat has housesoiling problems, first take him to the veterinarian for a thorough evaluation.

If no medical cause can be identified, the next step is a more in-depth evaluation of the problem to determine the cause and design a treatment plan that will best suit your cat and your household. You will need to provide information about:

- The people and pets in your home and their relationships with the cat
- Where the cat eats and sleeps
- All the locations and surfaces where your cat eliminates
- The litter boxes, how often you clean them, their location, and litter types
- Any changes that occurred just prior to the onset of the problem

Why He Does It

Common causes of marking include the introduction of new cats or new odors into the home (e.g., new plants or furniture), people moving into or out of the home, or moving to a new home. Cats that spray near doors and windows may be marking in response to other cats coming onto the property. Any changes in the environment that lead to an increase in anxiety or conflict can also cause marking.

A cat may avoid the litter or litter box or prefer to eliminate in locations or surfaces other than his litter box because:

- He has developed certain medical problems
- You do not clean the litter box well enough
- You do not provide enough litter boxes
- He has been confronted in the litter box by a family dog, another cat, or a family member (e.g., when trying to give him medication)
- He doesn’t like one or more attributes of the litter (type, depth, or scent)
- He doesn’t like one or more attributes of the litter box (height, cover, self-cleaning mechanism, or litter liner)
- He doesn’t like where the litter box is situated (e.g., insufficient privacy, proximity to the furnace)
- He prefers the surface or location that he has chosen to use

What to Do – Basic Tips

Scoop all of the litter boxes daily and replace the litter weekly. Provide at least one litter box per cat plus one extra per household. Clean soiled areas with a product that has been specially formulated to neutralized feline urine odor. To determine which litter type your cat prefers, offer two or three different types (e.g., clay, clumping, pearls, recycled paper, scented, unscented) side by side and determine which one the pet uses most. Then determine the type of litter box your cat prefers by placing the preferred litter in a variety of box types (e.g., different heights, different openings, with or without litter liner, covered or uncovered, self-cleaning). Some cats prefer a larger box, deeper litter, or a lower opening for easier access.

Marking Solutions

Because cats that have not been neutered or spayed are most likely to spray, neutering or spaying is the first step in treatment of marking. About 90% of neutered males and 95% of spayed females stop spraying after the neuter or spay procedure.

Next, identify all sources of anxiety. If the problem is due to an unhealthy relationship with other cats or people in the home, seek additional guidance from a behavioral specialist. If your cat is spraying when other cats come onto your property, use cat repellents, motion-activated alarms, or motion-activated sprinklers to keep the other cats away. It might be more practical to keep your cat away from doors and windows where he hears or sees the other cats, place blinds or shutters on windows, or use booby traps to keep your cat away from the problem areas. Safe, effective booby traps include upside down carpet runners with nubs up, sticky tape, aversive odors (e.g., potpourri, citrus spray, cat repellent), a stack of empty soda cans, or motion detectors that set off an alarm or spray air. A feline pheromone spray may be effective at reducing anxiety and changing the marking behavior from spraying to cheek rubbing.

Currently, there are no drugs licensed for the treatment of feline urine marking, but a number of human medications have been shown to be effective. Your veterinarian can explain the benefits and risks of using these medications to treat your cat.

Feline Inappropriate Elimination Solutions

It is important to reestablish regular litter use with no inappropriate soiling for a period of several weeks. When you cannot supervise him, it may be necessary to confine your cat (with his litter box) in an area of the home where he does not soil. Consider using one of the deterrents discussed above to keep the cat from returning to the problem area. Placing the pet's food bowls, toys or bed in the problem area might also be useful. Alternately, you may have to prevent access to the area by closing doors, putting up barricades, or moving furniture over the spot. If your cat eliminates in an inappropriate place in front of you, deter him with a water sprayer or noise device, but do not physically punish him, rub his nose in the mess, or yell at him.

Evaluate the litter location, litter type, and any other factors in the household that might deter litter use. If the pet is soiling in one or two specific areas, it might be preferable to move the litter box to that area or a similar area. If the cat is using a particular surface, such as a tile floor or carpet, giving him an empty litter box or putting a carpet remnant in the box may help. Gradually add small amounts of litter to the box until your cat feels comfortable using a box with litter.

Understanding your cat's daily elimination routine can help you determine when he will need to be confined or supervised.

The authors, Wayne L. Hunthausen, DVM and Gary M. Landsberg, DVM, Dipl. ACVB, are practicing veterinarians and pet behavior consultants.