

41 Cat Behavior Problems

House Soiling – Synopsis

House soiling or feline inappropriate elimination, is the most common behavioral complaint of cat owners. The problem may be urine and/or stool deposited outside of the litter box, or marking behaviors. When cats urinate on vertical surfaces, it is known as spraying or marking. Usually the cat backs up to a vertical surface, raises its tail, which may quiver, treads with its back feet, and directs a stream of urine backwards (see (42) Marking and Spraying Behavior and (40) House Soiling).

The first step is to rule out medical causes. Any disease of the urinary tract that causes increased discomfort, volume or frequency of urination can cause house soiling with urine. Similarly any disease affecting the intestinal tract that causes increased discomfort, volume or frequency could lead to house soiling with stools.

Medical problems in which the pet cannot control its urine or stool (incontinence), and conditions that cause pain or stiffness so that the cat cannot comfortably enter and use the litter box should also be ruled out. Once a cat has persistently eliminated outside of the litter box for medical reasons, the cat may learn to eliminate in the wrong location. Therefore, even if the medical problem has been resolved, behavioral therapy may be needed to re-establish regular use of the box.

What could the problem be if it is not medical?

Diagnostic possibilities for elimination problems in cats include (a) aversions or avoidance of the litter, litter box, or location aversions and/or (b) preferences for other substrates or locations. On occasion, some cats will eliminate on horizontal surfaces when they are frustrated, stressed, or anxious. In these cases, the diagnostic and treatment suggestions in (42) Marking and Spraying Behavior should be reviewed.



How do we determine the behavioral cause?

This requires a close look at the history including information about the home environment, litter box type and litter used, litter box maintenance (cleaning) and placement, and the onset, frequency, duration and progression of problem elimination behaviors. Other factors to note include other pets in the household and how they get along, any household changes and any patterns to the elimination such as the time, days of the week, or seasonal variations. The number and placement of litter boxes is extremely important in multi-cat households. Other information required is whether the cat is using the litter box at all, and the location, types of surfaces soiled and whether it is urine, stools or both.

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What can I try first?

The first step is to identify the nature of the problem. There are several steps you can take until you establish why your cat is soiling outside the box:

1. Start with determining if you made a change to the litter or litter area around the time the problem started and switch back to the preferred litter or site.
2. Make sure the litter box is scooped daily and clean the box itself regularly. The litter should also be changed often since it absorbs odors and moisture. Most cats prefer a freshly cleaned box, but some will not enter a new or recently cleaned box.
3. If you have more than one cat at home add additional litter boxes in additional locations. A general rule is to increase litter boxes to equal the cats' number plus one (i.e., if you have two cats, have three litter boxes).
4. If your cat has a preference for one location or substrate (i.e., living room carpet) you can try blocking its access to this area or use a product to make the area less appealing.
5. Change the function of the area to a feeding, sleeping, or play area. You can place food and water in the area, your cat bed, or place furniture in the area. Using the feline appeasing pheromone (Feliway®) may help.
6. Make sure the litter box is placed in an easily accessible area throughout the day. Your cat should be able to enter the box without disturbances (i.e., furnace turning on, another cat or the dog preventing access).



Litter aversion and substrate preference

Test your cat's preference for different litter types by providing two or more identical boxes with different litter inside (e.g., clumping vs. nonclumping). Once you clearly identify which litter your cat prefers compare this type with other types. Do so several times until you establish your cat's preference. You can also try the substrate that is found where your cat inappropriately soils (i.e., piece of carpet, towel, floor tiles, soil, or even an empty box). Once the preferred litter type has been determined, begin to alter the depth in one of the boxes. For defecation deeper litter is often preferred. If you use an odor neutralizer you can then compare one litter with the product and one without.

Box preference

Provide your cat with two or more different boxes such as covered vs. none covered box, small vs. large box, regular vs. automatic cleaning box, etc. Based on the litter and substrate test above use the favored litter in both boxes. Make sure the boxes are consistently well cleaned.

Location preference

Place several litter boxes in different locations in your house and establish your cat's preference. You can also place a box where your cat commonly soils inappropriately. If your cat uses this box regularly, you can try to move it several inches every few days, gradually moving it to an acceptable location.

I've made the litter more appealing and the house soiling areas less appealing, but the cat continues to eliminate in inappropriate areas. What can I try next?

First determine whether the pet ever soils when someone is supervising or at home. If not, the cat can be allowed free when someone is watching and any use of the litter can be immediately reinforced with favored treats (or even clicker training). A body harness can be used to ensure that the cat does not

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sneak off. When the cat cannot be watched (or if the cat will eliminate even when you are watching), confinement to an area with bedding, water and a litter box (and away from the areas that have been soiled) is often necessary to re-establish litter box use. Generally a small room such as a laundry room, extra washroom, or bedroom where the cat has not previously soiled should be utilized. Confinement may not be required all of the time. For example, if you can determine times when the cat will not soil, then you can allow the cat out of confinement at these times or conversely you may only have to confine at those times when the cat IS likely to soil. For example, some cats only soil at night or when the owners are away from home. It may also be possible to allow your cat out of confinement with minimal supervision for the first few hours after the cat has eliminated in its litter box. Allowing release from confinement and some food treats immediately following elimination may also serve to reward use of the litter box. Over time, cats that have been confined are gradually given more freedom and less supervision.

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