

Inappropriate Elimination — Solving Litter Box Problems

Inappropriate elimination — urinating or defecating outside the litter box — is a common behavioral problem in felines. The cause could be medical, behavioral, or a combination, but the good news is that the vast majority of the time, this problem can be solved! Your first step should always be to get your cat checked out by a veterinarian.

Is There a Medical Cause?

There are several medical conditions that can cause inappropriate elimination. Your cat will need to be examined by a veterinarian and some testing will need to be done to determine if there is a medical cause. Here are some examples of things your vet might look for:

- Bladder infection (these are common in senior cats, unusual in young adult cats but still needs to be ruled out).
- Bladder stone (these are more common in female cats than in male cats but can happen to any cat).
- Conditions that lead to excessive water consumption (there are probably a dozen such conditions and they are all more common in older cats versus younger cats, but most can be ruled out with a basic blood panel).
- Arthritis (usually an older cat's problem. Often these cats will urinate next to the box or near it because they cannot squat properly or cannot step into a high-walled box).
- Bladder tumor (not common but still a consideration in older cats, especially if there is straining to urinate and/or blood in the urine).
- Crystalluria, or crystals in the urine, which can be irritating to the bladder wall and cause pain.
- Constipation frequently leads to the cat passing stool in any number of places and is generally characterized by straining to defecate and small, very hard stools.

Of special note is the condition currently referred to as feline idiopathic cystitis (FIC). This condition amounts to physical manifestations of anxiety where the cat may not only urinate inappropriately, but also strains painfully and produces bloody urine. A male cat can actually obstruct his urinary tract, creating a medical emergency. If you suspect your cat may have an obstruction, seek medical attention immediately.

Is it Behavioral?

If your veterinarian has ruled out potential medical issues, you can begin to problem-solve from a behavioral perspective. It may take time to figure out the root of the issue and thus the correct solution, but in the majority of cases inappropriate elimination can be resolved.

LITTER BOX AVERSION/ ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

If your cat begins to urinate or defecate outside the litter box (or has been for a while), one possible reason could be that they find their current litter box setup to be unpleasant, or certain elements of their home environment may be causing them stress. If a traumatic event occurs while they are in or near their litter box, this could cause them to avoid the area, even if they've been happily using the box for months. Switching things up with a new location, box, or type of litter can help your cat go back to using their box again.

The following are suggestions for how to set up your home and litter box in an ideal fashion for your cat, as well as some changes you can make for a cat who has developed a problem.

- Provide more than one litter box. The recommended number of boxes is one per cat, plus one additional box.
- Use a large, uncovered box, and don't use liners.



TREATING ANXIETY

In some cases, you may be unable to identify or alter the cause of inappropriate elimination — such as if your new neighbor has a dog who barks all the time, which appears to stress out your cat, or if you're doing a kitchen remodel. In these scenarios, anxiety medication can be a great help. Whether your cat is engaging in territorial marking, has a litter box aversion, or there is something in the environment that is causing stress for your cat, reducing their level of anxiety can help resolve the issue.

The easiest anxiety-reducing product to try is Feliway, which is a synthetic version of the feline pheromones that cats deposit when performing facial marking (rubbing their face/cheeks on objects or people). These pheromones communicate to a cat that their territory is secure, and confers a general calming effect. Feliway can be purchased in two different forms: a long-lasting diffuser that plugs into an outlet, and a regular spray bottle. The spray bottle is handy for spraying directly onto surfaces that your cat has urinated on, after thoroughly cleaning them.

You can also talk to your vet about prescription anxiety medication, such as Fluoxetine. There are also CBD treats made for cats, and while you often don't need a prescription, you should still speak with your vet before using them.

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- Place each litter box in a separate location, rather than right next to each other, and choose locations that are relatively peaceful. Avoid putting litter boxes in laundry rooms or next to any noisy appliance. Some cats may prefer to have their box in a more secluded area like a large closet, while others prefer it to be out in the open.
- Experiment with the type of litter offered. Most cats prefer very fine, soft litter but there are outliers. Once you find something your cat likes, stick with it. You may also want to try, at least temporarily, using “Cat Attract” litter — this can be hugely successful in solving inappropriate urination. You can also try non-traditional substrates, such as dirt or small mammal bedding.
- Ensure that you are cleaning the boxes frequently. Litter should be scooped daily, and completely changed out once or twice a month (or more frequently for cats who are very focused on cleanliness). You should clean the box when completely switching out the litter, using unscented soap and water, or just water.
- Experiment with how much litter you put in the box. Some cats — especially those with long hair — prefer to have a very thin layer of litter in the box, as it makes it easier for them to stay clean. Other cats may want to be extra thorough about burying their business, so providing a thicker layer can make this easier for them.
- Ensure that other animals — dogs, cats, or even small children — are not stalking or harassing your cat when they are using the litter box, or even when they are near it. If the problem animal is a dog, try putting a litter box somewhere that the cat has access to but the dog does not — such as in a room with a baby gate that your cat can jump over, but your dog cannot. If the problem animal is another cat, you can often resolve this by adding additional litter boxes to your home, and ensuring that they are located in an area where your cat has an easy “escape route” rather than being put in a closet with only one entrance and exit. When bringing a new animal into your home, performing a proper introduction is vital to prevent this issue. You can find handouts on our website for guidance about introducing cats and/or dogs.
- Provide your cat with adequate enrichment and socialization. The more content they are with their life and environment, the less likely a behavioral issue will occur. Make sure they have access to scratchers, vertical space, a variety of toys, and other forms of enrichment including water fountains or “cat tv,” and set aside time every day to play with and spend time with your cat.

TERRITORIAL MARKING

Cats use urination and defecation as a means of communicating with other cats. By leaving their mark, they are telling other cats “I was here on this date at this time.” Other cats may then know this territory has been claimed and may act accordingly. Cats also mark by rubbing their faces on objects and by scratching vertically on surfaces, and this kind of marking should be encouraged.

Male cats who have not been neutered and female cats who have not been spayed are more likely to engage in territorial marking, but there are reasons an already neutered or spayed cat may feel the need to reassert a territorial claim:

- You recently brought a new animal into your home, or have new human or animal visitors.
- You recently brought new furniture into your home, or even just rearranged your furniture.
- There are cats or other wildlife that come near your windows or doors that your cat may be able to see, hear, or smell.
- The cat’s favorite person has a prolonged absence from the home.
- There is noisy construction or other unusual activity outside.

You may be able to make environmental or enrichment modifications in your home to help avoid territorial marking, particularly if you can anticipate a potential issue before it occurs. For example, if you buy a new couch, take some blankets and toys that your cat loves and put them on or near the couch, and give your cat extra treats and affection. If you’re having a repairperson come in to work on a broken sink, go play with or cuddle your cat on the other side of the house while the work is being done. If there’s construction happening on your street, turn on a fan for white noise or play some mellow music or “cat tv” to help drown out the foreign noises.

If you bring a new animal into your home, the best way to avoid territorial marking is to follow a slow introduction process. You can find handouts on introducing cats to other cats, or to dogs, on our website.

It is also very important to thoroughly clean any soiled areas, as cats are more likely to eliminate in the same location if some of the scent remains. Use cleaners that are specifically designed to remove urine scent.

In Conclusion

Inappropriate elimination is often a multi-faceted problem; for example, your cat may have stopped using the litter box because of a urinary tract infection, and has now developed a surface preference for carpet and a location preference for the bedroom closet. This is why it is so important to address the problem from both a medical and behavioral perspective. Do not be afraid to reach out to both a veterinarian and a behaviorist for help solving this issue!

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