

## Kitty, Please Use the Litterbox!

**Litterbox problems are among the most frustrating for cat owners. Learn how to solve current soiling situations and prevent future ones.**

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We hold cats in awe and appreciation as mysterious, former creatures of the wild who now share our homes. But sometimes the mystery is down-right torturous for us when we try to figure out why they abandon or ignore the litterboxes we provide, and instead leave their smelly waste behind the couch, on the bed or a sprayed-on, amber-colored graffiti on our walls. Mysterious? Yes. Perplexing? Certainly. Aggravating? Absolutely! This is a big problem, because too much of this nose-holding mystery and our unfathomable kitty is at risk of going from an indoor kitty to an outdoor one, or looking for a new home altogether.

House soiling is the most commonly reported behavioral reason for owners to have their cats euthanized or relinquish them to shelters. Other owners turn cats out of their homes to become outdoor-only cats, exposing them to a greater risk of illness, injury or even death. Worse yet, disgruntled owners think that cats eliminate on their possessions because they are spiteful or angry, leading to mistrust and resentment.

On the other side of the coin is a cat that is following its natural inclinations in an unnatural environment and doesn't understand why the usually loving human who shares its space is sometimes so angry. How distressing it must be for them to be punished for not following rules they cannot understand, never knowing when their natural behavior will evoke loving cuddles or cold withdrawal.

### Is Something Wrong with Your Cat?

From the human perspective, feline elimination problems are simply cats doing their business where they shouldn't. But for the cat there can be a myriad of different problems, and in order to solve house-soiling difficulties, you need to approach them from the cat's perspective.

Determining the type of elimination problem can be the confusing part. Does the cat have a health condition, a problem with its litterbox, is it spraying to leave a signal or is it responding to anxiety?

For all animals, urine and feces are the natural end products of digestion and metabolism. But for cats, urine is also an olfactory signaling device, a communication method.

"To tell if the cat is spraying, the single, easiest factor to look at is if there is any urine being deposited on vertical surfaces," said Laurie Bergman, VMD, coordinator of the Behavior Service of the UC Veterinary Medical Center in San Diego. "With marking, small amounts are being deposited. The frequency may be several times a day."

Location is important in distinguishing between marking and toileting. Marking is done near windows, doors, and areas where encounters with other cats occur," Bergman said. "By contrast, with toileting issues, the deposits are usually in a more hidden location, such as behind the sofa or at the end of a dark, quiet hallway. Also, look for inciting factors. For example, marking may occur right after encounters with other indoor cats, after seeing cats outside, or may be more common at certain times of day, such as dawn and dusk.

Many medical conditions can first show up as a change in elimination patterns. Therefore, if a cat is not using its litterbox, particularly if this is a change from previously good habits, have its health checked by a veterinarian.

For example, an older cat may have difficulty getting to the litterbox because of painful osteoarthritis. In fact, a change in litterbox habits may be the first sign of this painful condition seen by the owner.

Diabetes and other metabolic conditions also need to be considered. Very high on this list is bladder disease, known as Feline Urinary Syndrome (FUS) or Feline Interstitial Cystitis (FIC). Cats with FIC, which accounts for approximately 1.5 percent of cats seen by veterinarians, have frequent urination, pain and blood in the urine, and they urinate in places other than the litterbox. Stress seems to trigger FIC episodes, and cats with FIC seem to be more susceptible to stressful circumstances.

### The Litterbox

Other reasons a cat may fail to use its litterbox have to do with the litterbox itself. The litterbox might be too small, not

stocked with a litter your cat likes, or not clean enough. It might also be in a bad location, such as a busy hallway, hidden behind a rumbling clothes drier, next to the cat's food (who wants to urinate next to their food?), too far away, in a difficult place to reach, or past a scary dog.

"And let's not forget about the dark," said Sharon Crowell-Davis, DVM, director of the Animal Behavior Service of the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine Behavior Service in Athens, Ga. "I have seen cats who used their litterbox in the day, but eliminated in other places at night. With one of these cats, it turned out the litterbox was in a closet in the basement and the cat had to negotiate stairs and make it clear through the basement in pitch dark to get to the litterbox. Yes, cats can see well in dim light, but they can't see in total darkness. Adding a night-light solved that problem."

Inter-cat issues are often a root cause of many litterbox problems. Some bully cats will limit a more timid cat's access to the litterbox. The harassment can make a profound difference on a cat's behavior and its willingness to get to the litterbox.

Recent evidence has shown that cats are not only social but that some of them suffer from separation anxiety in the absence of their attachment figure. Interestingly, one common finding in cats with separation anxiety is the tendency, even when the owner is present, to urinate on the owner's bed or other belongings. While the exact reasons for this are unknown, it may be that the anxious cat is evacuating its bladder where it feels secure.

#### Pee-Mail

Although we don't know exactly what a cat is trying to communicate when it is spraying, we do know situations that stimulate the behavior. Some cats are very sensitive to social stress, so cats that are fighting or breeding outside the house can disturb them. Also, stressors such as remodeling, a visit from a repairman, divorce, holidays, guests coming to stay, adding a new dog or cat to the household or a new baby can stimulate cats to spray.

"Urine marking for communication is a behavior that is potentially in all cats' repertoires," Bergman said. "It seems that some cats, when presented with the right set of circumstances, 'discover' the behavior."

If triggers are eliminated from the cat's environment, the spraying will diminish or cease entirely. "We know that feline urinary spraying is an anxiety condition, because the only class of drugs that successfully treats it are the drugs that reduce anxiety," said Pat Pryor, DVM, assistant professor at Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine in Pullman, Wash. "This is not to say that cats have to have drugs to correct this condition. There are cats we have sent home with a behavioral prescription and the problem was solved by simple management like getting the outdoor cats away from the house."

Drugs may be part of some veterinary treatment plans but they're typically not the ultimate cure. "The behavior may stop while the cat is on drugs, but unless the triggers are identified and eliminated, the behavior will come back when the drugs are stopped," Bergman said. Bergman recommends medication with behavioral modification and environmental enrichment to get the annoying habit of spraying to stop.

#### Anxiety and Punishment

Cats that soil in the house are frequently living with a great deal of stress and anxiety. Cats have a natural "fight or flight" response to stressful events. This survival mechanism goes awry when cats in human environments can't avoid constant stressors. Exposure to this unremitting anxiety alters the cat's physiology and makes it more susceptible to diseases, such as FIC.

"We may not realize how sensitive a cat is to something as simple as moving furniture around the house or having company over for dinner," said Tony Buffington DVM, a veterinarian and specialist in feline urinary disorders at the Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine in Columbus, Ohio. "Cats are creatures of habit and they depend on us to keep their surroundings stable and safe."

Another category of house-soiling is directly related to anxiety. This is seen when large changes come into a cat's life, something is causing significant distress, or the cat is suffering from separation anxiety syndrome. Experts once believed that cats were solitary and didn't have a need for social bonding, but this view of cats is incorrect.

Whatever the reason for eliminating outside the litterbox, one approach that does not help is punishment. Punishment

increases the cat's anxiety and makes it feel all the more insecure. Punishment also makes the owner feel terrible and harms the trust implicit in the human-animal bond.

"Punishment never gets you anywhere," Pryor said. "It doesn't make the problem better and, in some situations, can make it worse. This is a tough concept to get across because we want to do something it's human nature. But I tell people, even if the cat is spraying right in front of them, or peeing on their briefcase, anything that adds anxiety or emotionality to the situation can make it worse."

#### The Sweet Smell of Success

Buddy was a 13-year-old neutered Birman. "For 12 years, he was a wonderfully behaved animal," said his owner Carol Darr, of Santa Fe, N.M. But then two important changes came in Darr's life. She adopted, Zelda, a boisterous and outgoing alley cat. Then Darr started spending 12 to 14 hours a day away from home, caring for her ill mother. Buddy started defecating and urinating on the wool runner by the front door. This went on for months. "I tried disciplining him to no avail," Darr said. "I'd get so upset, I'd scream at him, and then I hated myself for doing it. I asked friends and my veterinarian for advice ... and went on the Internet looking for solutions. I had gotten to the point where I considered getting rid of him. Yet I kept stalling."

Instead, Darr created a private refuge for Buddy, a quiet and safe place to eat, drink and sleep. "When my mother died, I couldn't cope with the thought of people coming to my house and walking into a pile of cat poop, so I put Buddy in the basement with a litterbox, food, etc. He had a box to sleep in and a towel on a cabinet he seemed to like to lay on.

"When life settled down a bit (about a week), I let him out. I haven't had a problem since. One day I forgot to shut the basement door and when I couldn't find him, I checked downstairs. There he was, happily sleeping in his box. He lives down there now, in his own space. He comes up and roams the house, but goes back down there to sleep. He's been religious about the litterbox and he's even more affectionate. He would never get up on my bed, but does so now and cuddles up to me, which is a first.

"What he was trying to tell me, I still don't know. Maybe it was just, 'I need my own space.' But whatever it was, the problem seems to be solved. My only concession has been to remember to leave the basement door ajar. And that certainly doesn't raise my blood pressure. The frustration seems to be behind me and we're all happy again."

Cats can be mysterious, but with knowledge and understanding, not incomprehensible. If we work to see their world from their perspective and consider their needs, we may solve the problems they are having outside the litterbox.