

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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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.