

CAT HOUSESOILING PROBLEMS

Cats urinate and defecate to eliminate waste, to mark territory, to communicate with others with individual scents and sometimes it seems, in reaction to stressful or anxiety producing events. Soiling in the house may or may not be a “litter box problem.” Marking is unrelated to cats’ need to relieve themselves. If your cat is soiling in the house, it’s important first to determine the reason for the behavior so effective solutions can be found.

What Causes Cat Soiling Problems and How Can They Be Resolved?

Medical Problems

A variety of medical conditions, ranging from urinary tract infections to diabetes can cause your cat to begin soiling in the house. Even if you believe your cat is healthy because she doesn’t act as though she’s ill, only your veterinarian can evaluate your cat’s health. Don’t risk your cat’s well-being by assuming she’s healthy, when she may not be.

What To Do

Anytime your cat’s elimination habits change, or you believe your cat has started marking territory, your first step must always be to take your cat to your veterinarian. Your veterinarian will conduct a thorough physical examination and may recommend laboratory testing or other diagnostic procedures as well.

Urine Marking

Marking is not an elimination behavior but rather a communicative one. When cats mark their territory they typically back up against a vertical object, lift and wiggle their tails and release, or spray, relatively small amounts of urine on the surface. There is no evidence that domestic cats use feces to mark.

Cats mark in order to leave their scent and make others aware of their presence. Cats may mark in response to what they perceive as threats to their territory. This may be the addition of a new pet or human family member to the household, the presence of outdoor cats, or conflicts among cats in the family. Marking can also occur in response to unfamiliar odors.

Cats may also be motivated to deposit their own scent whenever they are anxious. Smelling their own familiar odor may help decrease their anxiety. It has been reported that breeding male cats will not mate in an unfamiliar environment until they have urine marked.

What To Do

The most important first step is to try to identify the stimulus that is responsible for the urine marking. If this is possible, then one option is to change or manage your cat’s environment so he doesn’t come into contact with this trigger.

Anytime your cat has an elimination problem, your first step is to consult your veterinarian.

Ask your pet professional for more information about cat behavior.

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Urine marking has nothing to do with the litter box.

You must clean the soiled areas with an enzymatic cleaner that removes the odor.

For example, you might cover windows and doors with blinds or curtains to prevent your cat from seeing free roaming cats, or discourage their presence with humane booby traps or fencing.

If you can't prevent your cat's exposure to what is causing him to spray, another option is to change your cat's reaction. For example, if your cats or other pets aren't getting along you will need to address their relationship problems.

If your cat seems to be anxious or stressed in response to a move or some other change in his environment, or you can't determine why he's spraying, you may need the help of a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist, or other behavior consultant knowledgeable about cat behavior to help you work with your cat's behavior.

Males in general, and particularly intact males, are much more likely to urine mark than females, so if your cat isn't already neutered, see your veterinarian. Medication, in conjunction with behavior modification, can also be helpful for some spraying problems.

Problems Related To Litter Box Factors

Many elimination problems occur because cats develop preferences for where, and on what, they like to relieve themselves. We don't always know what causes a cat's preferences to change, but if the litter box isn't to the cat's liking, she will relieve herself elsewhere.

Both research and experience have revealed what most cats seem to prefer in a litter box. One of the most important is the type of litter.

What type of litter? Cats prefer small particles that feel soft to their paws. Most clumping litters are finer-grained and softer than clay ones. Avoid rocky or pellet type litters.

Cats are quite sensitive to odors so choose an unscented litter. Keep the area surrounding the litter box free of pungent odors from room fresheners and cleaning agents.

Keep the depth of the litter at no more than two inches. Most cats don't like to sink into the litter, but rather just like some loose particles to rake around before and after relieving themselves.

What type of box and how many boxes? Provide at least one litter box per cat in the household. Even if you have only one cat, two boxes may be a good idea. Some cats prefer to urinate primarily in one box and defecate mostly in the other.

Consider the size of the litter box and the size and age of your cat. If it isn't large enough or the sides are too high for a kitten or older cat they may not use the box. Some cats may not like plastic liners or covers on their boxes. Provide options and let your cat decide what she prefers.

Location of the box(es). The location of the litter boxes should be easily accessible but afford some degree of privacy as well. If your cat has to wait in line for the litter box, has to run down two flights of stairs and go behind a noisy furnace, can't find a litter box that has been moved, or is constantly harassed by a dog or child while she is trying to do her business, she may find another place to relieve herself. Corners are often good locations for boxes, because the cat can see what's in front of her and can't be surprised from behind.

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Avoid putting all the litter boxes adjacent to one another or near your cat's food and water. Not all cats feel comfortable relieving themselves when a housemate is right next to them. By choosing multiple locations it also becomes more difficult for one cat to "ambush" another, because he can only watch one location at a time. Consider placing a litter box on each floor of the house where your cat spends time.

Cleanliness. Cats are very clean and may not use a dirty box. Scoop the box at least daily to remove all feces and urine clumps. If your cat is particularly finicky you may need to scoop the boxes twice a day. If dried urine or feces accumulates on the box, wash it with a mild detergent. Consider a self-cleaning litter box if your cat won't use the box if waste from another cat is present, and/or if you know you won't be a consistent scooper.

Make Soiled Areas Less Appealing

First, you must clean the soiled areas with an enzymatic cleaner that removes the odor. Avoid vinegar or other substances that only mask the odor, and ammonia products that may resemble urine odor.

Discourage your cat from continuing to use the soiled areas by changing their texture. Put plastic, aluminum foil, double sided tape or an upside-down carpet runner on the area.

"Booby-trap" the area with motion detectors. Block the areas with plants or furniture. You can try putting your cat's food and water on the spot.

Remember, that unless you address the reasons why your cat is soiling, she will only choose another location. Simply making the soiled areas less attractive won't solve the problem.

If creating a "cat friendly litter box" using the suggestions in this article doesn't bring your cat back to the litter box, you will probably need the help of a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist or other behavior consultant knowledgeable about cats to help you work with the problem.

How Can Elimination Problems Be Prevented?

Because there are so many reasons why cats soil in the house, it is difficult to give specific advice that will prevent all elimination problems. We've already discussed the importance of spaying and neutering to prevent marking problems.

Avoid making sudden changes to your cat's litter box. Also, notice any changes in your cat's elimination behavior. Most cats perform a sequence of circling, sniffing, and raking at the litter both prior to and after elimination. If your cat's behavior changes and she stops burying her waste, begins standing on the side of the box to avoid touching the litter, scratching the carpet or surrounding surfaces rather than the litter, or runs away quickly from the box after relieving herself, all may indicate she's dissatisfied with the litter box. For some cats, any or all of these behaviors may be normal, but it's important for you to know what's typical for your cat and to watch for changes in her behavior.

Provide regular veterinary care so that any developing medical can be identified and treated promptly.

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What Not To Do

Isolating or confining your cat with her litter box and away from the soiled areas is unlikely to solve the problem. You cannot “retrain” your cat to use the box by doing this. Because the reason for the soiling hasn’t been addressed, your cat will just go back to soiling when released from confinement.

NEVER rub your cat’s nose in her waste, hit, slap or kick your cat or use any other form of physical punishment. Trying to punish your cat by showing her “the mess” after the fact is not only not effective but also unfair to your cat, because your cat cannot make the connection between the act of eliminating outside the litter box and later unpleasant treatment from you.

Your cat is not using her litter box because she is mad at you. Cats do not act out of spite or revenge.

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