

INAPPROPRIATE ELIMINATION BY CATS



When a cat urinates or defecates outside of its litter box it presents an extremely frustrating problem which can have a multitude of causes. The first step is to consult a veterinarian to determine whether any medical conditions exist. Many litter box problems are related to illness, therefore a thorough physical exam should be performed to address these causes. If there is no physical abnormality contributing to the problem, then one should consider environmental factors which may be contributing to the problem. It is very common that a cat may not use its litter box properly because of some aspect of the box aversive to them. Cats are extremely fastidious, so the trick is to discover what is important to them and provide that consistently.

Avoidance or Preference?

Many elimination problems in cats can be attributable to either an avoidance of a certain problem or dislike associated with the litter box or a strong preference for some alternative (an inappropriate) place to eliminate. Discovering the exact problem often requires experimenting with the following variables:

Number of Boxes

Behavioral studies have taught us that many cats prefer to urinate and defecate in different areas. Most cats do best if they have at least two litter boxes, and not side-by-side. Multiple cat households need to increase the number of boxes so that cats don't compete for litter areas. A good rule of thumb is to have one box per cat plus one additional box. (e.g. 3 cats = 4 boxes).

Box Location

When it comes to box location your cat wants *privacy* and *escape potential*. Boxes should be separated from each other as much as possible. Houses with multiple floors should provide a box on each floor. Keep boxes away from feeding or sleeping areas. Ideally, boxes should be in quiet areas and not by appliances which have motors such as heaters and refrigerators. Cats also prefer locations which have a quick escape route if necessary. Avoid high traffic areas and sites where one cat might be able to "guard" the box from another cat. If a cat really prefers a location, placing a box in that location can solve the problem. It can then be moved an inch each day to a mutually agreeable location.

Type of Box

Cats have a variety of preferences and aversions when it comes to the type of litter box. Some cats dislike covered boxes, others don't seem to care. Most cats intensely dislike plastic liners. Experimenting with different sizes may be necessary... the box typically needs to be 1.5 times the length of the cat (nose to tailhead). High walls can be a problem for older arthritic animals.

Type of Litter

Litter type and litter box cleanliness are extremely important to some cats. Preference tests have shown that 75% of cats tested preferred the sand-like clumping litter to the larger grain type. Some owners may complain about sand being tracked through the house, but a jute mat placed around the box can help. Most scented litters are aversive to cats. The amount of litter in the box should only be about 1½ inches thick, so don't use too much at one time.

Odor

Most cats prefer a clean litter box. Elimination problems may be initiated or maintained by the odor from urine and feces. Infrequently cleaned litter boxes may be aversive. Use soap and water once weekly... fragrances may upset the cat. Be obsessive for a while about litter box cleanliness and see if it helps.

Territorial Marking

Unfortunately, some cats may urinate and/or defecate outside the box as an expression of territorial behavior. This is often referred to as "spraying." If the cat has not been already neutered, this usually eliminates the problem. In neutered pets the behavior can be related to other animals and people in the house. It is important to understand that this behavior is part of normal feline social behavior in the wild. When this behavior occurs in a household, there are often complex underlying environmental and social factors which must be understood in order for an effective treatment plan to be implemented. Occasionally, pharmacological treatments are also required.