

## **Feline House Soiling**

As veterinarians, the most common behavioral problem in cats we face is inappropriate urination. Many frustrated owners come to us in desperation because their cats are urinating in their homes. The stress this situation places on cat owners can lead to the cats being turned outside, given away, surrendered to the SPCA or even euthanized.

Urinating outside the litter box is not always a behavioral problem. It can be the cat's way of telling its owner he is feeling unwell. There may be an underlying medical condition such as bladder stones or crystals, infection or feline lower urinary tract disease. All of which can cause your cat pain during urination. Pain your cat now associates with its litter box. These conditions often involve straining to urinate, genital licking, or bloody urine in conjunction with urinating in unusual places. It is very important not to assume that the inappropriate urination is behavioral. Get your vets help to rule out an underlying cause first.

Behavioral marking can fall into different categories. In some cases it may be territorial. Cats use marking as a way of communicating with other cats. Cats may resort to this behavior if they are under stress such as the prolonged absence of the owner or the presence of other cats. Signs that the behavior is territorial include inconsistent use of the litter box, spraying on upright surfaces, urinating near a door or window, on the owner's bed or always in the same location. This type of behavior is more common in cats that aren't neutered. Changes in the household such as a new animal, roommate, baby, a move or new furniture can be a trigger.

If your veterinarian suspects that the behavior is territorial, there are several options available to curb the problem. If your cat has not been neutered, this will be recommended. Odor eliminators should be used in the marked areas. Feliway spray, a spray consisting of feline pheromones, sprayed onto the area can be successful and can also be purchased as a diffuser to spread the pheromones throughout the room. Determining the cause of stress on your cat and doing your best to minimize this is very important. Anti-anxiety medications may be very helpful as a last resort if the source of stress cannot be determined or removed.

Another very common reason cats may refuse to use a litter box is that the box is simply not acceptable to them. This is called litter box aversion and can stem from a variety of issues. The litter box may be too small. An ideal litter box is at least one and a half times the length of your cat. The litter box may smell bad or not be clean enough. Ideally the litter should be scooped twice daily and the litter itself changed weekly. The box should be washed with soapy water (no strong smelling disinfectants). If there are multiple cats in the household, each cat should have its own litter box, plus there should be an extra one available. Cats prefer an uncovered litter box and may be reluctant to use the litter box if they have had a bad experience in it such as being harassed by a small child or scared by a loud noise. Older cats with arthritis may need a shallower box that allows them to get in and out of it painlessly.

A cat with a litter box aversion usually does not spray a vertical surface and will not urinate or defecate in the litter box. There may be a history of a recent change in the type of litter. The litter box may be in a very busy part of the home or near a noisy appliance. Cats with this type of inappropriate urination often need to be re-trained to use the litter box. Additional boxes should be provided in a different location in the house. If all else fails, the cat should be confined to a large crate with a litter box provided until he or she has proven that he will use the box and then gradually allowed into a larger area.

Inappropriate urination is a very frustrating condition to diagnose and resolve in cats. It is very important to differentiate behavioral versus medical causes so it can be addressed accordingly. Once the underlying cause is determined, there are lots of options to get your cat back on track. Talk to your veterinarian for help in re-establishing your loving relationship with your pet and to get your cat back to the fastidious level of cleanliness cats are known for.