

Cats and Elimination Problems

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Cats that eliminate (urinate or defecate) somewhere other than the litterbox comprise the largest block of feline behavior patients for veterinarians. This is a very common, and can be a very serious, problem for the pet owning family. Inappropriate elimination is the number one behavioral cause for euthanasia of pet cats (in dogs, biting or aggression is the most common behavioral reason for euthanasia). Clearly, this is an area veterinary professionals need to be informed about and ready and able to help pet owners before smaller problems become unlivable problems.

This discussion is specifically discussing behavioral inappropriate elimination. Of course, there are many instances in which problems with elimination may appear to be behavioral but in fact have a medical basis. Other times, this is both a medical and behavioral problem. For these reasons, please give us a call or schedule an appointment to discuss and examine your pet in order to prevent misdiagnosis and inappropriate or inadequate treatment. Additionally, we understand that you know your cat best and may have already discovered things about your pet that contradict the following information. Read it through and put into place those suggestions that make sense to you in your own home environment

General Recommendations

- The rule of litterbox numbers: You should have one litterbox per cat in the household plus one.
- The rule of litterbox locations: If possible, do not line up all the litterboxes in a row in a single location. Part of the goal of multiple litterboxes is to provide the cat(s) a choice. One of the choices should be location. Try to find at least two locations when placing litterboxes. This is especially important in multiple cat households as cats will sometimes guard the litterbox and make it difficult for a more timid cat to access the area.
- Litterboxes should be large and stable; no cat is comfortable in a flimsy box that threatens to tip with his or her movement. This is especially true for larger cats. Self-cleaning boxes work for some cats but others are intimidated or fearful of the noise and movement which may lead to avoidance of the litterbox.
- Most cats prefer fine grain, scoopable litter and non-covered litter boxes.
- Cleanliness – again a no-brainer but not always easy to do consistently in our busy day-to-day lives. Scoop daily and empty and thoroughly clean boxes weekly. Clean using a detergent cleaner and rinse and dry thoroughly.
- Old cats – geriatric cats get achy just like the rest of us. As your cat ages, try to find a location for an extra litter box on the main floor the cat spends his or her time on. For both young kittens and older cats, litter boxes should be close, easy to reach and easy to get in and out of.
- Litterbox aversion. Cats that have a medical problem with their elimination (for instance, urinary tract disease, constipation, and diarrhea) can associate the litterbox with the pain or discomfort of their disorder. Pay particular attention to keeping the litter area clean and accessible for cats if they are experiencing medical issues. Special attention may need to be focused on these pets and your veterinarian can work with you in these circumstances.

- Laundry – many cats litter area is in the basement, near the laundry area. Many cats also will tend to urinate on laundry. If this is part of your cat's problem, keep laundry in covered containers and out of open baskets and off the floor.
- There are cleaners that clearly work better to eliminate the specific odors associated with urine and feces. These cleaners are frequently referred to as “enzymatic, odor-neutralizing” and include products such as Nature's Miracle, AIP (“anti-icky poo”) and Simple Solutions. These work far better than routine household cleaning supplies.
- Finally, and importantly, while this whole list may involve changes to the critical environment of the cat's bathroom area, one thing we know is that, in general, cats don't like change. As much as changes may be attempted or recommended, do so with an eye to making incremental change while at the same time trying to maintain stability as much as possible. If considering moving a litter box, for instance, don't make any changes to the existing area. Instead, add another, new box somewhere else. If moving away from covered litterboxes, keep the boxes you have and add an uncovered box. Gradually over time the old boxes can be removed if the new situation proves successful. In short, to the extent possible keep things the way they are and make additions to the system which can then be gradually removed over time as need be.

Hopefully this will provide you with some tips for starting out on the right foot with any developing inappropriate elimination problems. As always, individual pets require individual care. Call us to schedule an appointment so we can evaluate your pet, discuss your specific history and tailor a responsible and effective treatment program.

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