

Inappropriate Elimination in Cats

By Melissa Bain, DVM, DACVB

One of the most common behavior complaints about cats is inappropriate elimination outside the litter box. It is also a common reason why healthy cats are relinquished to shelters (and consequently euthanized). You should take heart, however, since this problem can almost always be adequately managed. You should also take heart from the fact that this problem is widespread – you are not alone.



Is inappropriate elimination different from urine marking?

Inappropriate elimination is not the same thing as urine marking. You must have the problem definitively diagnosed by your veterinarian, since the treatment for each condition varies. Here's how to tell the difference: Inappropriately eliminating cats will urinate or defecate on horizontal surfaces only, with large amounts of urine deposited and with the definitive urinating posture of squatting to eliminate. The cat may stop using the litter box and urinate and/or defecate in other areas of the house. Sometimes the cat will eliminate both inside and outside the box, or use the box for urination or defecation only.

Cats who urine-mark will urinate mostly on vertical surfaces, though they sometimes mark horizontal surfaces, too. They deposit small amounts of urine, and display a typical posture while marking, which includes backing up to the object, lifting and often quivering the tail, and treading with the back feet.

Why has my cat started to eliminate inappropriately?

Several factors may influence inappropriate elimination problems – and what is initiated by one factor may be continued by another. These factors include the following:

- If you switch brands of litter and your cat doesn't like the new brand, he may quit using the box, or show other signs that the litter is not to his liking (by not digging in the litter, by shaking his paws after leaving, by trying to eliminate while standing on the edge of the box, or by running out of the litter box immediately after eliminating). He may prefer rugs or smooth surfaces over the litter. Residual odor in the inappropriate areas can attract cats back to that area.
- If you move the litter box, your cat may continue to eliminate in the original location, or she may select another spot and then continue to use it.

- A cat may develop a litter box aversion if he previously had an unpleasant experience while in there, such as pain associated with urinary tract inflammation or constipation, or being frightened by a dog or another cat in the household.

How can my veterinarian help with this problem?

Your veterinarian can diagnose whether the problem is indeed inappropriate elimination. He or she can also rule out any medical problem that may be contributing to the inappropriate elimination, such as urinary tract infection or inflammation, diabetes or arthritis. (Keep in mind, though, that once the medical problem has been treated, the cat can still have a residual behavior problem that must be addressed.) Medications are rarely recommended as treatment for this condition, since they are almost never needed if appropriate environmental management is undertaken.

What can I do to alleviate this problem?

First, you can perform a litter box trial to determine what litter your cat prefers. Cats generally prefer fine, unscented, clumping litter over other litter types. Don't use liners – your cat may find these aversive. Segregate the offending cat in a room with at least three litter boxes, each with a different type of material in it, including the litter that you are currently offering, the surface that the cat is inappropriately eliminating on (such as carpet remnants, if the cat is eliminating on carpets), and another litter type. Your cat will select his or her preferred litter material.

Second, make the litter box as attractive as possible. Keep the litter box immaculate by scooping daily and cleaning the entire box every week or two with mild soap and water, rinsing completely. The box should be large enough to accommodate the cat – most litter boxes on the market are too small. The plastic storage boxes designed to fit under a bed are often a better choice. Don't use covered litter boxes, since many cats find them too confining. (Also, if the dirty litter box is out of sight, you might not clean it as regularly!)

Third, make sure you have enough litter boxes. The ideal number of litter boxes is one per cat, plus one. Spread the boxes around the house. Cats don't like to be disturbed while in the litter box, so put the boxes in quiet, less trafficked areas (not next to the washing machine and dryer, for instance). Don't put a litter box near the cat's food and water dishes.

Next, you can work on discouraging your cat from using the inappropriate area for elimination. Try placing a litter box in the area where the cat is eliminating, and then *gradually*, inch by inch, move the box to a more appropriate area after the cat is using it consistently. You can also try placing the cat's food or toys over that area.

Another option is to make the inappropriate area inaccessible, at least for a while, so you can retrain the cat to use the litter boxes. If it is not feasible to block off the area, there are ways to make the area aversive to the cat. Try using one of the following on the spot: plastic carpet runners placed upside down, tinfoil, heavy plastic, contact paper with the sticky side up, strong-smelling potpourri, solid-type room deodorizers, or cologne.

The odor left behind in the soiled area should be removed by using an enzyme-based cleaner, since they are designed to eradicate the odor-causing bacteria. Avoid using anything containing ammonia, or any other household cleaner.

What do I do if I catch my kitty in the act?

If you catch the cat in the act of eliminating, don't ever directly punish your cat by yelling, physically punishing the cat, or rubbing the cat's nose in it. Direct punishment will not solve the problem. Indirect punishment, such as using a squirt gun or tossing a towel toward the cat, may disrupt the cat's behavior temporarily, but to be completely effective, the punishment must occur when the cat *begins* the behavior (not halfway through or afterward), it must happen every time, and the cat must not see you deliver the punishment. Since these conditions are pretty difficult to achieve, it's probably best not to use any form of punishment if you catch your kitty in the act.

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