

Inappropriate Elimination in Cats

There are many reasons why cats eliminate outside of their litterbox. The first thing to consider is a health issue. Take the cat to the veterinarian to rule out any medical problem that may be causing the inappropriate elimination, such as a urinary tract infection. If the veterinarian does not find a medical problem, it is most likely a behavioral problem.

In order to stop inappropriate elimination you will first need to figure out what is causing it. Below are some of the common causes and some suggestions for correcting the problem.

Litter aversions (the cat doesn't like the LITTER itself)

Signs

The cat shakes her paws excessively to remove the litter when she comes out of the box.

The cat does not bury his waste after he eliminates.

The cat balances on the side of the box to eliminate.

The cat won't even go into the box and is eliminating right next to it.

Causes

The litter is unacceptable because of its smell or texture.

The box is consistently dirty.

The litter is too deep.

Treatment -

1. Give the cat a "litter smorgasbord". Set up several boxes each containing a different type of litter so that you can find out your cats preference. Most cats prefer soft clumping unscented litter so make sure that is one of the options.
2. Scoop the box/s daily and change it/them completely every week.
3. Keep the depth of the litter somewhere between 2-3 inches.

Litter BOX aversions

Causes:

The box is too small or the sides are too high (for kitten or older cats).

The cat had a frightening or startling experience when in the box.

The cat has experienced pain or discomfort when eliminating in the box.

The cat was ambushed by another cat or a dog while in the box.

Treatment

1. Make sure the box is the right size for the cat. Most cats prefer extra large boxes that allow them to have room to pick the right location and bury the waste sufficiently. If the cat is old or you have a kitten, make sure the sides of the box are not too high for the cat to get into it.
2. If the cat has developed an aversion due to a scary experience or pain from a medical problem, the litter box may need to be relocated. It is also sometimes necessary to provide a new box that is very different from the old one.
3. Make sure the litter box is in a location where the cat has plenty of visibility to prevent an ambush. Put the box in a place where the cat can get to it but the dog cannot.

Surface preference

Some cats develop a preference for a surface other than their litter such as bedding, carpets or piles of clothes or towels for elimination. This can happen secondarily to some type of litter box aversion.

Treatment

1. Clean all soiled areas well with an enzymatic cleaner (Anti-Icky-Poo, Zero Odor).
2. Deny the cat access to preferred surfaces (close doors, pick up laundry, etc.).
3. Make the soiled area less appealing using smell aversion (air fresheners, perfumes, citrus sprays), or place an aversive texture (plastic, aluminum foil) over the area.
4. Change the substrate in the box so that the texture is more like the soiled areas (make the litter softer -switch to fine grained, clumping litter).
5. Place the preferred substrate (such as an old towel) in the box. Slowly introduce litter on top of it. Gradually make the towel smaller and smaller until the cat is using the litter again.

Location preference

Sometimes cats develop a preference for a location that is different from where their box is. Perhaps there is too much activity or the box is located so that there is only one way out or the cat cannot see all around while eliminating. The box may be too isolated in an out of the way scary place (basement) or it may be located near unpredictable noises (near furnace or other large appliance like the washer and dryer that occasionally make scary noises).

Treatment

Change the location of the litter box to meet the cat's preferences. It may be necessary to put the litter box in the place the cat is eliminating and slowly move it (inches a day) to the new desired location.

Conflicts between family cats

Inappropriate elimination may result from one cat being harassed or threatened by another. The victim cat can become afraid to go to the litter box if she is then vulnerable to attack or harassment there. Additionally, some cats simply will not use a box that another cat has eliminated in.

Treatment

1. Have multiple boxes in multiple locations.
2. In all locations the cat should have several escape routes and good visibility all around the box.
3. Work on improving the relationship between the cats using positive reinforcement (food treats whenever they are together).

Fear and anxiety

If the cat is afraid to move comfortably around the house she may start to eliminate inappropriately. This is often seen in cats who are new to a house and not yet comfortable with the environment.

Use of punishment by the owner could cause the cat to hide whenever the owner is present and thus eliminate close to the hiding place.

Fear of the family dog can also cause the cat to hide and be too afraid to get to the litter box when needed.

Treatment

1. Identify the source of the fear and anxiety and remove it if you can.
2. Stop all punishment.
3. Move to a safe location.
4. Natural calming remedies to reduce anxiety (see below).

Natural calming remedies that may help when anxiety is the cause

Feliway - Synthetic facial pheromone - comes in plug-in diffusers or spray. This product has been shown to calm many cats.

Composure Calming Chews - A calming supplement designed to promote relaxation during stressful situations.

Rescue Remedy - homeopathic remedy (Bach Flower essence) - place a few drops on the cat's fur daily (they will lick it off and get it into their system).

Olfactory cues (odors)

Odors from other animals that have soiled the area may contribute to inappropriate elimination.

Treatment

1. Neutralize the odors with an enzymatic cleaning product (Anti-Icky-Poo or Zero Odor).
2. Restrict the cat's access to soiled areas during the cleaning process.