



Coping with Inappropriate Elimination

Expert health and behavior advice from the feline care professionals at
Paws, Whiskers & Claws
The Feline Hospital
www.pawswhiskersandclaws.com

Cat owners often become understandably frustrated when their cat begins to urinate or defecate outside the litter box. Nearly 1 cat in 10 will have an inappropriate elimination problem in her lifetime.

Why isn't my cat using the litter box?

There are many reasons why a cat may stop using the litter box, including:

- Medical conditions,
- Stress and inter-cat aggression,
- Litter box logistics.

Remember that urinating or defecating outside the litter box is unusual; your cat is telling you that something is wrong!

What should I do if my cat starts urinating or defecating outside the litter box?

The first step is to take the cat to your veterinarian! The most common reason for litter box problems is that the cat is trying to tell you that she's ill or in pain. This may be a simple urinary tract infection or something more serious.

After medical reasons have been ruled out, you can start to consider the other possible causes.

Do not punish the cat or confine her to just one room. Some people think they can "re-train" the cat in that way, but it doesn't work! Cats aren't *trained* to use a litter box; they use it instinctively. Confining the cat to one room will increase her frustration and stress level, but it won't solve the problem!

What medical reasons can cause litter box problems?

Your cat may have a urinary tract infection, urinary crystals, bladder stones, or external infections such as urethritis or vaginitis. It could even be pain caused by a seemingly unrelated problem such as an abscessed tooth or arthritis.

Why? If your cat feels pain or discomfort when she uses the litter box, she doesn't understand that the pain is coming from her kidneys or broken tooth, or whatever the cause. She just knows that litterbox=pain, so she'll try to

find another place to eliminate, hoping that will make the pain end. But urinating on the bedroom carpet doesn't ease her pain either, so she tries another spot, and the cycle continues!

You may even need to change the look, feel, or location of the litter box after the medical problem is resolved to encourage your cat to use the litter box again.

Other medical problems that may be associated with inappropriate elimination:

Kidney Failure	Constipation
Diabetes Mellitus	Impacted Anal Glands
Hyperthyroidism	Intestinal Parasites
High Blood Pressure	Skin or Flea Allergies
Anxiety Disorders	Cancer

Appropriate treatment of the underlying medical condition may end your cat's inappropriate elimination. If not, it's time to examine other possible causes.

Stress-related elimination problems

Yes, cats can get stressed, and they may show their distress by urinating or defecating outside the litter box.

Stress can come from changes in your household: moving, the birth of a child, the addition of another pet, etc. These stresses may cause not only litter box problems, but they may aggravate existing medical conditions.

When possible, introduce changes gradually, and allow the cat to explore new people and things at her own pace.

You can help your cat cope by providing a "safe room" for your cat – a place where she can go to escape the stress. The safe room must have food, water, litter boxes, a comfortable kitty bed, and some toys. Put a baby gate in the doorway to discourage unwanted visitors. Introduce the cat to the safe room, but you don't need to confine her there; let her use it when she feels the need.

Cat condos and cat trees are important to stress management. A tall sturdy cat tree gives your cat a secure perch from which to view what's going on, and it gives her a place to escape. This is particularly important if you have small children, dogs, or multiple cats. The height offers your cat safety and a feeling of control. It is especially comforting to them if they can view multiple rooms from a single vantage point.

Consider using Feliway, which is a synthetic product that mimics feline facial pheromones and helps a cat feel at ease. It is available in a spray as well as an electric diffuser.

We offer behavioral counseling and a variety of educational handouts that may help you make your cat more content and less stressed.

Aggression between cats

One cause of stress is aggression between cats in a multi-cat household. You can greatly reduce this aggression by providing plenty of litter boxes as well as multiple food and water dishes. It is important that the cats don't have to compete for too few bowls and boxes! Place feeding stations and litter boxes throughout your home; don't concentrate them in one area! Cats are at their most vulnerable when they are eliminating, and so it's vital to make sure that they feel safe in the litter box and won't be ambushed by other cats, the family dog, or a curious toddler!

Feliway (described above) can help with aggression issues. You can also call us to discuss other behavior modification options, including medication.

Remember that cat trees and cat condos are important to multi-cat households. They help cats establish a hierarchy, which is important to their group dynamic.

Litter box logistics

There are several factors to consider, including the number and size of boxes, location, type, litter box filler, etc. Inappropriate elimination could be the result of having too few litter boxes, using the wrong size or type of box, placing the boxes in appropriate locations, or using the wrong litter box filler.

Please read our Litter Box Facts handout for detailed information on maintaining your cats' litter boxes.

Cleaning and managing soiled areas

If your cat has urinated or defecated outside the litter box, you must clean the area to completely eliminate all traces of the stain. Soap and water is not enough. You may not notice an odor, but your cat's delicate nose will, and that will encourage her to use the same spot again.

Sometimes the best solution is to give the cat what she seems to be asking for: place a litter box in the area where she's eliminating! If you don't want to leave the litter box there permanently, we will advise you on how to gradually move the litter box into a more acceptable location after your cat uses that litter box consistently for several weeks.

There are several odor-eliminator products on the market, but the enzyme-based cleaners tend to work the best. The product that we recommend most frequently is Urine Off. We also suggest Veterinary Strength Outright Stain and Odor Remover.

You can also make the soiled area less attractive to your cat:

- Place cat's food or water at the site (after cleaning)
- Provide alternative way to mark (scratching post or pad)
- Aluminum foil
- Scat mats
- Potpourri on the site
- Motion sensors with audible alarm
- Catnip on the site
- Double-sided tape
- Upside-down contact paper or vinyl carpet runner (nub side up)
- Citrus-based sprays (many cats dislike the smell of citrus)
- SsssCAT motion sensor deterrents

Call us for additional ideas about deterrents!

If that doesn't work...

Sometimes a cat will continue to soil an area that has been thoroughly cleaned.

Why? The cat apparently feels a need to mark that spot. Every time you remove the scent marking, your cat may be compelled to mark the area again.

When that happens, you can try a different approach. Instead of using enzyme cleaner, clean the area with plain water, then spray the area with Feliway. You won't smell urine, but your cat may be satisfied that the area is still marked, and not need to mark it again. Use Feliway on the area; the Feliway encourages facial marking and reduces the chance that the cat will spray urine there again.

Spray Feliway on the area twice a day (every 12 hours) for the first 4 weeks, then once daily for another 4 weeks.

Note that the enzyme cleaner breaks down the pheromones in Feliway, making it ineffective, so don't use enzyme cleaner on surfaces marked with Feliway.

The bottom line

- Inappropriate elimination often has a medical cause.
- There are many things you can do to prevent behavioral litter box problems. It's far easier to prevent these problems than to resolve them after they start.
- Always remember that your cat's relationship with the litter box is complex and emotional. It's not just a feline toilet!