

# TAKE YOUR PET TO THE VET

## FELINE LITTER BOX PROBLEMS—

### What To Do When They Are Peeing In All The Wrong Places

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Inappropriate urination and/or defecation are common complaints among cat owners. In some cases a medical problem is to blame for “missing” the litter box. In many other instances, a behavioral component may be the cause of inappropriate litter box usage. This article will briefly discuss some of the medical and behavioral causes of inappropriate urination and defecation in cats. In addition, a list of practical tips will be provided to help tackle cats that miss the box for behavioral reasons.

Common medical conditions that can cause inappropriate urine elimination include feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD), bladder stones, urinary tract infection, bladder cancer, and renal disease, among others. Cats that strain to urinate, visit the litter box frequently, eliminate small amounts of urine frequently, lie in the litter box, or urinate in strange places should be examined by a veterinarian for these medical problems. Diagnostic testing to determine if a medical condition is present includes: urinalysis, urine culture, abdominal x-rays, abdominal ultrasound, and routine blood work. If these tests are within normal limits, the cat is more likely to have a behavioral issue.

Inappropriate defecation is more often associated with a behavioral issue. However, cats with diarrhea or constipation problems may be more likely to defecate out of the litter box. Diarrhea and constipation are not specific signs for any one illness and can have many causes. For example, diarrhea can be caused by parasites, bacterial overgrowth, dietary indiscretion, inflammatory bowel disease, food allergy, and cancer, to name a few. Constipation can be the result of a low fiber or low moisture diet, the presence of foreign material in the GI tract, or decreased GI motility. Thus, examination and diagnostic testing by a qualified veterinarian are also recommended for cats that are not defecating in the litter box before a diagnosis of a behavioral issue is made.

Once medical causes of inappropriate elimination have been ruled out, a behavioral issue can be considered. The two most common behavioral issues associated with inappropriate elimination include stress (social stress and other sources of stress) and litter box aversion. Many things can stress a cat. Some may seem small or trivial but it is important to remember that cats are creatures of habit. They prefer things in their life to be stable and unchanged. Changes that can cause stress for the household cat can be minor, such as a change in work schedule, a new type of litter, or the presence of new curtains/furniture that block a favorite window, or major such as the addition of a new pet, a new baby, or a move to a new home. Social stress, caused by the interaction of multiple cats in the same household, is another major cause of inappropriate elimination. Even though there may not be obvious tension between individual cats, social stress must not be overlooked.

Litter box issues are another major source of problems for cats. Cats develop a preference for a certain litter type/texture at a very young age. Any deviation from the predetermined litter preference may cause issues. Litter box size, location, cleanliness, odor, etc. can all cause cats to find another place to urinate or defecate.

Keeping the above information in mind, the following tips can be tried to remedy behavioral causes of inappropriate elimination:

- Use a fine, unscented, clumping litter. This will most closely mimic natural elimination substrates. Once you find an acceptable litter, do not deviate from it.
- Remove litter box covers. Covers limit the amount of space the cat has to eliminate, scratch, cover, etc.
- Add another litter box or boxes. The goal is to have 1.5 boxes per cat. This is very important for multi-cat households.
- Add a larger litter box/jumbo box. Many commercial litter boxes are too small. Try a RubberMade or similar storage container. I have had great luck with this tip, especially in houses with a lot of cats.
- Keep litter boxes clean. Remove stool and urine clumps at least daily. Remove all scoopable litter on a regular basis and rinse box with hot water. Don't use strong scented cleaners, such as Pine-Sol, Lysol, or bleach.
- Don't put food near litter boxes. Cats don't like to eat where they eliminate.
- Don't put litter boxes at a dead end in the house. Make sure there is more than one way to access the box. This is especially important for multi-cat homes.
- Create core areas for each cat. Find where each cat likes and provide resources (food, water, litter box) for each core area.
- Use an enzymatic cleaner to eliminate odors. This is especially important for areas in the house that were soiled previously. Anti Icky Poo is one example that is available online.
- Make sure the litter box is not near anything “objectionable.” Get on your hands and knees and check for strange drafts, odd smells, loud noises such as an off balance washing machine or loud furnace. These things can be scary for cats!
- Try Feliway or another feline pheromone. Pheromones can be naturally calming for some anxious or nervous cats.

*\*\*\*The information provided here is for education purposes only and is not intended to take the place of your regular veterinarian. If you have any questions regarding the health of your pet, please do not hesitate to contact a veterinarian.\*\*\**