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COPING WITH CAT ELIMINATION PROBLEMS

*By: Rhonda Schulman '94, University of California; A. Michele Trammel '93, University of Pennsylvania
Dr. Karen Overall, Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania*

Litterbox avoidance is one of the most frequent feline behavioral problems. Any cat, regardless of age, sex, breed or neutered status, may develop a problem with elimination habits. These cats are not acting "spitefully"; rather, they are demonstrating a dissatisfaction with the current litterbox situation.

When a problem of this nature first arises, owners should consult with their veterinarian to explore the possibility that this behavior is related to a medical condition. It is important to rule out and treat urinary tract infections, partial blockages, kidney disease, and more chronic illnesses, such as diabetes.

Daily removal of waste products from the litterbox is required. Owners should have one more litterbox than the number of cats (up to seven boxes), distributed throughout the house, giving the cats a choice of location. Owners should reinforce the cat by taking her to the litterbox and praising her if she scratches or uses the box. While it is difficult to actually catch the cat in the act, if owners do so, they should frighten the cat with a loud noise. A foghorn or a thrown tin of pennies is often sufficient to startle the cat into aborting the action. Punishment should *only* be administered within the first 30-60 seconds of the initiation of the behavior. Initiation includes any sniffing, scratching, and circling the cat might do. *NEVER* punish a cat after the fact; she will not make the appropriate connection and may come to fear the owner.

Substrate preference is the most common elimination behavior problem in cats. Many of these cats prefer carpeting and other soft surfaces. Non-deodorant, dusty litters are preferable for many of these cats. Clay litters, sand, non-scented sawdust, and the newer type of recyclable litters are often accepted by cats that reject other types of litters. Other modifications include experimenting with litter depth, presence or absence of box liners, and covered versus open boxes.

Some cats only urinate or defecate in certain spots outside of the litterbox. These cats exhibit a *location preference*. These spots must be made unattractive to the cat. Many cats dislike the feel of plastic. Covering the soiled areas with heavy gauge plastic after cleaning them with enzymatic cleaners may discourage the cat from returning to that locale. Certain scents, such as deodorant soap and cedar wood, are also distasteful to many cats. Placing a bar of soap or wood chips on the cat's preferred spot may also deter her usage of that area. If none of these efforts are successful, the owner may have to resort to moving a litterbox to the cat's preferred spot. After the cat begins to use the box again, the owner can gradually (an inch a day) move the box back to a more desirable location.

A more drastic measure that can be implemented for any of these problems is isolating the cat. For several days, the cat should be kept alone in a small room with a litterbox, food, and water. This should break the habit of eliminating in inappropriate areas. Slowly expand the area to which the cat has free range, supervising constantly at first, and use negative reinforcement, as previously described, as necessary. Elimination problems can also include spraying. This is a territorial behavior in which the cat adopts a standing, not squatting, posture, and often with tail wagging, "sprays" urine onto vertical surfaces. *Any* cat - male or female, neutered or intact - may spray. Unfortunately, the environmental modifications described above do not tend to resolve this problem. Pharmacological intervention is generally required, and concerned owners should consult their veterinarians.

HOUSE-SOILING IN CATS

By Dr. Nicholas H. Dodman, Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, courtesy of information from Dr. D.B. McKeown and Dr. U.A. Leuscher. Ontario Veterinary College, Canada

Cats that are house-soiling with urine may be differentiated from those that are spraying by the amount of urine that is released. A spraying cat eliminates small amounts of urine at a time, usually on vertical objects, whereas a house-soiling cat tends to empty his bladder, resulting in a large puddle or wet spot.

Cats may stop using their litterbox for a variety of reasons. They may have developed an aversion to the litter or the pan, they may be under some environmental stress, or they may have some disease. Environmental stresses, while not common causes of house-soiling, can be difficult to deal with. Moving, a new animal or person, or separation anxiety may cause house-soiling. If the cat is urinating on a person's clothing or bed, the cat often feels some frustration related to that person. For example, the cat may be very dependent on that person, and the person's schedule changes so they are spending less time with the cat. Urinating on personal items usually starts several days to 1 week after the event. As stresses are cumulative, it may be that some combination of the above causes is responsible for your cat's loss of house-training.

Disease may also cause the cat to lose house-training. Anything which causes the cat to drink excessively will also increase the number of times it has to urinate, which can lead to "mistakes" around the house. Gastrointestinal diseases and nervous system disturbances may also cause the problem. The most common, disease-related cause of loss of house-training is urinary tract infection or subclinical cystitis. For this reason, your first step when the cat starts house-soiling should be to have it examined by your veterinarian.

TREATING HOUSE-SOILING

1. TAKE THE CAT TO YOUR VETERINARIAN FOR A COMPLETE PHYSICAL EXAM & URINALYSIS

Make certain that your cat does not have a disease which is causing him to soil in the house.

2. ADDRESS POSSIBLE PROBLEMS WITH THE LITTER BOX

- *TOO CLEAN* - Cats hate the smell of soap. Rinse the box with hot water, but do not wash it.
- *TOO DIRTY* - Scoop the litter daily, and change it twice a week
- *CHANGE THE TYPE OF LITTER*. Cats tend to avoid deodorant litter or litter containing chlorophyll. You might try mixing sand 50:50 with the litter- Cats have desert ancestors, and sand seems to be a preferred substrate for elimination.
- *NOT ENOUGH LITTER IN PAN* - Cats generally like about 2" of litter.
- *LOCATION OF LITTER PAN* - Put it where the cat is soiling, then gradually move it to a more desirable location.
- *CHANGE THE TYPE OF PAN* to one with high sides, closed in, etc.
- *BUILD A FRAME* around the pan so the cat can jump in easily.
- *NEVER punish the cat when it is in or near the litter pan* - this will cause the cat to associate the pan with unpleasant experiences and avoid it.

3. CLEAN THE ENVIRONMENT

Clean the areas where the cat has urinated or defecated. The smell of previous messes will stimulate the cat to eliminate in that location again. Cats have a very sensitive sense of smell, so it is impossible to eliminate the odor totally. Therefore, you must neutralize it. Compounds to use include Odorban, Odomil, Nature's Miracte, etc.

- *CARPET* - After cleaning, odor neutralize and perhaps attempt masking residual odors with citrus scent.
- *TILE* - Wash the area with a strong soap like Pine-Sol. Mix up a solution of 1 part Pine-Sol and 4 parts water. Wash the area with the Pine-Sol & water mixture every 4 days for 1 month.
- *SHOWER OR TUB* – leave 2" of water in the bottom of the tub
- *FLOWERPOTS* - use pure blood meal, mothballs, or upside-down mousetraps to keep the cat away.

4. REMOVE OR ALTER ENVIRONMENTAL STRESSES WHICH MAY CAUSE ANXIETY

If the cat is urinating on clothes or bedding, keep the cat out of the bedroom. You might also try putting a burglar alarm or mousetrap on the bed to scare the cat away when it jumps up. By keeping the cat out of the room for a few weeks, it may stop soiling.

If other changes have been made in the environment, the ideal solution is to change things back to the way they were before the cat started soiling. We realize that in many cases this is not possible. If so, try spending more time with the cat. We may also want to have your veterinarian prescribe some medication to reduce any anxiety your cat may be feeling. Medication, however, will not solve the problem, and may prolong the treatment by reducing your cat's ability to learn. To eliminate the problem, you must determine what is bothering the cat, and deal with the cause.

5. RETRAIN THE CAT TO THE LITTERBOX

Confine the cat to a small room (the bathroom is ideal) for 1-2 weeks. Put the cat's litter pan, food and water and toys, along with his bed in the room with him. This will mean that the cat has no opportunity to go anyplace other than his litter box, located in the confinement area: Once he is consistently using the box, you can gradually allow access to the rest of the house.

When you start training, place a small amount of soiled material in the box. The odor will attract the cat to use the litter. When you move the pan out of the bathroom, make sure it is in a quiet, accessible location. You may wish to put a litter pan on each floor of your house.

The above techniques work well, but they require a commitment from you if they are to be effective. We are here to help you in whatever way we can, so please call (773) 935-2311 if you have any problems or questions.