



LITTER BOX ISSUES

(Information from the MSPCA, HSUS, Tufts Veterinary School and Best Friends)

Urinary issues are the number one reason cats are surrendered to shelters. The first way to resolve the problem is to spay or neuter your cat. Never punish your cat for not using a litter box. Your cat is not trying to make your life more difficult, he's just trying to find comfort. You can help him – and yourself – by thinking outside the box.

STANDING UP TO URINATE

Some cats go into a litter box and pee straight back, which is often confused with spraying. The cat just can't or won't squat to pee. This is easy to fix; stand a piece of plexi-glass in the litter box (not behind it). Your cat will pee against it, and the urine drips down into the box.

SPRAYING

Spraying is technically not a litter box issue. It is territorial marking that allows cats to communicate with each other. The smell of urine identifies the cat and its reproductive status to other cats. Males most commonly do it, although females (especially those in heat) and neutered cats can do it, too. The cat backs up to a vertical surface like a wall with his tail straight up and twitching; he may tread with his paws. In rare cases, a cat sprays from a squatting position. Usually cats spray specific vertical areas, but some cats spray horizontal surfaces like floors, furniture or stovetops.

The most common reason that cats spray is due to the smell, sound or sight of another cat that has come into the yard. It doesn't matter if the invading cat is intact or spayed/neutered. As the number of cats in the environment increases, so does the competitive stimulus that causes spraying, which is why your pet cats may start spraying, regardless of how well they have been getting along.

Spraying may also reflect environmental stress or anxiety, such as:

- New people in the home or someone moving out of the house
- Changes in your work schedule
- New pets in the home
- Renovating, rearranging furniture, changing the location of the cat's food or litter box
- If the cat is spraying on a person's bed or laundry, the conflict may be related to that person.

Genetics are a factor, because there seems to be an inherited predisposition to spray. Illness, such as a urinary tract infection, may also cause spraying. Cats don't mark out of spite or jealousy. If your cat pees on your baby's diaper bag, it's not because he is jealous of, or dislikes, your baby. The unfamiliar scents and sounds of a new baby in the home are simply causing him to reaffirm his claim on his territory. If your cat urinates on your new boyfriend's backpack, it doesn't reflect his opinion of your taste in men. Your cat sees an intruder and is letting the intruder know that this territory belongs to him.

All of the above causes are addictive. To stop a cat from spraying, you have to address all potential causes simultaneously. Once your cat or another cat has sprayed an area, the smell will encourage a cat to re-spray the same area.

Monitor your cat's movements. If he sniffs an area he has previously marked, interrupt him with a loud noise or squirt him with water. It's best if you can do this without him seeing you. That way, he'll associate the unpleasantness with his intent to mark rather than with you.

Regular cleaning products won't remove the odor. You need an enzyme-breaking product like Nature's Miracle. A black light is also helpful in finding the exact spots where the cat sprayed.

Cats don't spray near their playing, sleeping and eating areas. If your cat sprays against a bureau, move his food and water bowls to that area. If your cat marks your bedspread, play with the cat on the bed.

MEDICAL

If your spayed or neutered cat stops using a litter box, take your pet to the vet to see if the cat has a medical condition, such as urinary tract infection, crystals in its urine, bladder stones, kidney issues, diabetes or idiopathic cystitis (which means the bladder is inflamed for an unknown reason).

If your cat is straining, uncomfortable or unproductive when urinating or attempts to urinate more frequently than usual, take your cat to your veterinarian within 24 hours because a bladder blockage can become life-threatening quickly.

BEHAVIORAL

If your spayed or neutered cat doesn't have a medical condition and is not spraying that leaves a behavioral

issue. You have to become a detective to figure out why your cat is suddenly not using a litter box properly. Your cat is not acting out of spite or revenge (those are human emotions). He has a good reason for avoiding the litter box. Something changed in his life that he can't handle, and his anxiety makes him urinate in the wrong place. Stressors can be anything: you got a new pet; your father moved in; you moved to a new place or you're away from home more; you bought a new couch; there's a new cat in your backyard, the washing machine is making a new noise; your father moved in; you and your spouse are arguing more; a change in wind direction.

It could be a bizarre reason, such as your cat was in the litter box when there was a tremendous clap of thunder or a neighbor's cat jumped on the window screen next to the litter box. Other times the original source of the litter box problem may not be the reason it's continuing. For example, your cat may have stopped using the litter box because of a urinary tract infection, then developed a surface preference for carpet and a location preference for the bedroom closet.

It can be very frustrating trying to figure out why your cat isn't using the litter box. Keep a log of where and when your cat pees to determine a cause and pattern, but don't hover over him because will add to his anxiety. Depending on the reason for avoiding the litter box, the problem may be consistent or occasional. Either way, it can be fixed.

MEDICATION

Some cats with inappropriate elimination improve substantially when treated with prescription medication that controls anxiety. The medication doesn't remove the stressor, but allows your cat to respond better to whatever is causing the stress. These medications are well tolerated by most cats and don't turn them into zombies. Buspirone (Buspar) can make cats more confident and alter their body language around other pets reducing the probability of attacks. Fluoxetine (Prozac, Reconcile) helps to stabilize mood, decrease reactivity and it has some anti-aggressive properties. Other medications are Amitriptyline, L-theanine (Anxitane) and Clomipramine (Clomicalm). Some people shy away from trying medications, but a cat taking behavioral medications is better than a cat surrendered to a shelter. All should be prescribed by a veterinarian.

LITTER BOXES AND LITTER

Something discouraged your cat from using his litter box. It could be the texture, size or odor of the litter, the box itself and/or the location of the litter box. A very common cause for urination or defecation outside the litter box is that the litter is not scooped frequently enough and the box isn't cleaned thoroughly. If the box is in a noisy or high traffic area, the cat may stop using it. If too many cats share only a few litter boxes, territorial behavior may prevent a cat from using a box. Some cats will not use a litter box if it is covered, too small or has a plastic liner. Also, your angry reaction to your cat's toileting habits may chase him away from the litter box. Most cats prefer unscented clumping litter with the consistency of fine sand. If you're bothered by the litter,

a thin layer of baking soda on the bottom of the box will absorb odors without repelling your cat. To determine which kind of litter your cat prefers, put different types in several boxes around your home. Whichever one is used the most, buy that litter and stick with it. Don't buy whatever's on sale. Some people think that the more litter they put in the box, the less often they will have to clean it. This is not true. Most cats can't and won't use the box if the litter is more than 2 inches deep.

The following litter box ratio is crucial for success: have one more litter box than you have cats (3 cats should have 4 boxes). However, don't line multiple litter boxes together. A cat sees that as one large box. Place at least one litter box on each level of your home. Put a litter box wherever your cat urinates inappropriately. The boxes will be in awkward places for you, but when your cat begins using the box, move it a few inches each day toward the desired location. Eventually, you can remove it

Many litter boxes are actually too small for an adult cat. Based on scientific studies of cat behavior, the ideal size for a litter box is longer than the cat's length (at least 2 square feet). Plastic cement mixing tubs are ideal litter boxes. You can buy them for under \$10 at Home Depot or Lowe's.

Most people place the litter box in an out-of-the-way spot in order to minimize odor and loose kitty litter in the house. Often, the litter box ends up in the basement, sometimes next to an appliance and/or on a cold cement floor, which is a turn-off for a cat. If your cat likes to scratch the surface around a litter box, she may find the cement floor unappealing. If your cat is very young or old, she may not be able to get down a flight of stairs in time to use the litter box. If the furnace, washer or dryer suddenly comes on while the cat is in the litter box, she may run away from it forever.

Some cats won't use a litter box after another cat has used it. Scoop litter boxes once or twice a day. Clay litter should be changed entirely at least once a week, and clumping litter should be changed every other week. The box should be washed with warm water at every complete change. Don't use bleach; it's an overwhelming odor for cats.

After cleaning the spot, you can make it unattractive by covering it with aluminum foil, contact paper with the sticky side up, plastic runners with the points up or double-sided tape. An ultrasonic pet repellent device that dispenses a burst of air at the location is very helpful. You can also close off a soiled area to the cat for a while. Remember - most litter box issues can be corrected. You need time and patience to correct a litter box issue. Change one thing for a couple of weeks. If it's not successful try something else for a couple of weeks. WARL's staff have used these techniques to successfully resolve litter box issues with shelter cats and their own pet cats.

