



Stanhope Park Veterinary Hospital

FELINE BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS HOUSE SOILING

Cats are usually fastidious about their toileting habits and will consistently use a litter tray indoors if provided, or loose sand or earth outside in the garden.

Therefore, it can be very worrying if urine or faeces are discovered in the corner of the room or elsewhere deemed “inappropriate”. Occasionally a one-off accident may occur if the cat is ill, trapped in a room or suddenly frightened. If inappropriate urination or defaecation in the house persists, then it should be investigated for the health and welfare of the cat.

Whatever the cause **PUNISHMENT IS NOT THE ANSWER**, and will only make the cat fearful and exacerbate the problem. Deterrents such as tin foil, pepper, citrus peel or a water pistol will merely redirect the behaviour to another site, whilst causing further anxiety to the cat and delay investigating the root cause for the behaviour.

Remember, the cat is not displaying a dirty protest or seeking revenge! Something has gone wrong with its world and some detective work is required to discover what this is.

URINE SPRAYING OR INAPPROPRIATE URINATION?

Cats use urine as a scent signal or “mark” for themselves and other cats. Depositing urine for scent marking is very different to urinating to relieve a full bladder, so it important to establish whether the cat is spraying or urinating as the solutions may vary.

To urinate, the cat squats and deposits a volume of urine on a horizontal surface. The cat may then scratch at the area around the urine, though this is not always the case. Common sites for inappropriate urination include carpet; settees; duvets; baths or sinks, although it may occur in any location.

To spray urine, the cat usually stands up, making a treading motion with its back feet, quivers its tail and sprays a small amount of urine backwards onto a vertical surface such as a wall, leaving an obvious scent mark. Common sites for spraying include doors, windows, around cat flaps, curtains, electrical equipment and shopping or rubbish bags.

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CLEANING THE SOILED AREA

Whether a genuine accident or not, once the cat has soiled at a particular location, its sensitive nose will encourage it to use that place as a regular toilet.

The best way to break the habit is to keep the cat away from the area for as long as possible, remove any smell that the cat can detect and perhaps change the layout of the location by using pieces of furniture to block access. Alternatively, placing a food or water bowl at the area may also discourage toileting as cats do not like to toilet near such valuable resources.

Wash the area with a 10% solution of biological or enzymatic washing powder then rinse with cold water and allow the area to dry thoroughly. This method works best when the amount of liquid used is minimal to avoid over-saturating, particularly with carpet. Once the area is dry, the final step of the cleaning process is to spray lightly with surgical spirit using a plant mister, scrub gently and leave to evaporate (*surgical spirit may cause dyes to run on fabrics*).

Commercially produced enzymatic cleaners such as **“Urinator”** or **“Urine Off”**, are also available specifically for the purpose of removing the stain and odour of cat urine and faeces. Carpet is extremely absorbent and urine often penetrates the full thickness to the flooring underneath. If the area has been badly soiled over a period of time, it may be necessary to cut out the section of carpet and underlay and treat the concrete or floorboards underneath before replacing.

Never use bleach to clean soiled areas, as the ammonia will exacerbate the odour and attract the cat to toilet there again.

REASONS FOR HOUSE SOILING

There are numerous reasons for a cat to start soiling indoors. In some cases the problem can be persistent. There are many considerations and modifications relating to the cat’s entire environment that can be looked at, but in all instances of house soiling, a thorough clinical examination by your vet should be initially carried out to identify or rule out medical causes. Tests such as urine samples and blood samples may be suggested to identify possible underlying causes, with further investigations such as ultrasound and x-rays of the urinary tract considered dependent upon initial findings. Other problems such as pain when toileting due to, for example, osteoarthritis, are also possible underlying causes, emphasizing the importance of a veterinary examination for all house soiling cases.

Although cats are considered a “domestic” species, they still retain many of their natural wild instincts, and can therefore suffer from stress-related disease and illness if their home or territory does not meet their specific requirements, with stress frequently manifesting as inappropriate elimination within the home.

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Some common reasons for house soiling are described below:

DIRTY LITTER TRAYS

Cats don't like using litter trays that are heavily soiled. Litter trays should be cleaned out completely at least once weekly, and topped up with fresh litter daily after solid lumps and clumps are removed. If the litter is a non-clumping variety, it should be changed every couple of days (*solids removed daily*), as the build-up of odour from the urine passed can become extremely unpleasant for a cat's sensitive sense of smell.

SMELL OF THE CAT LITTER

Using scented litter, deodorants or disinfectants with strong smells may put the scent-sensitive cat off using the tray. Use a mild detergent and hot water or specific litter tray cleaner, and rinse the tray thoroughly. Avoid disinfectants that turn cloudy in water as these usually contain phenols which are toxic to cats (e.g. "Dettol"). Cats learning to use the tray initially may need to establish it as an appropriate latrine and too frequent cleaning may weaken this association.

POLYTHENE LITTER LINERS

These can sometimes catch in a cat's claws as it scratches, causing litter to spray upwards. It may be worth experimenting without liners if they have been used.

WRONG TYPE OF LITTER

Changing the consistency or type of litter may put the cat off using it. Hardwood-based pellets may have been acceptable as a kitten, but as cats get heavier some object to walking on such an uncomfortable surface. Cats tend to prefer fine grain litter with the consistency of sand with no scent or deodoriser. If you want to change the litter type, mix the new one in gradually over a week to gauge the cat's reaction, or place a new tray with the new substrate alongside and allow the cat to choose.

POSITION OF THE LITTER TRAY

If the tray is positioned in the open, where the dog, children or other cats can disturb it, the cat may feel too vulnerable to use it, and instead may seek a more secure spot behind the television or curtains etc. Cats tend not to like to use litter trays situated next to noisy appliances such as washing machines or dishwashers either. Place the tray in a quiet corner where the cat only has to watch in one or two directions at once rather than in the open or in a thoroughfare. Placing food near the tray will also put the cat off using it, so place feeding bowls elsewhere.

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TYPE OF LITTER TRAY

Some cats prefer the security of a covered tray while others prefer an open tray as it offers more options for escape. If you normally use an open tray it may be worth purchasing one with a lid or vice versa. An inverted box with one side cut out or careful positioning of house plants (*cat safe!*), may provide enough privacy. Some covered trays have flaps over the entrance which can be one obstacle too many for an insecure cat. Also self-cleaning trays should be avoided as these can activate whilst the cat is still in there, which will induce fear of using the tray. The size of the tray may also be important – litter trays should be rectangular shaped with a length of at least 1.5 times that of the cat from nose to base of tail. Older cats with stiff joints may also struggle to get in and out of high sided litter trays so a lower sided tray or entrance may be preferable.

NOT ENOUGH LITTER TRAYS

Litter trays (*as well as other resources such as food and water bowls; scratching areas etc*), should be provided following the formula **“1 PER CAT PLUS ONE EXTRA, LOCATED IN SEPARATE AREAS”**. Having only one litter tray to share between cats may result in one cat bullying and blocking access to the tray, causing an insecure cat to seek a more secure location to toilet.

BAD ASSOCIATIONS

Occasionally a cat may decide not to use the litter tray because it has had a bad experience there. Giving medication or touching the cat whilst it is using the tray may be sufficient to create a negative association. Repositioning the tray to a quiet spot may help.

EARLY TRAINING

Kittens will often soil in the house when they are young if they are given immediate access to large areas. When kittens first arrive in their new home they are only weeks away from their original litter training by their mother. Their bladder and bowel control are not as developed as an adult's so it is important that the young kitten has easy access to the litter tray at all times. The kitten should be confined to one room initially, with increasing periods of time to explore other areas after a few weeks. Every time the kitten uses the litter tray, it is establishing an entrenched behaviour that will be maintained throughout its life.

ILLNESS

Urinary tract disease or diarrhoea can cause soiling as the cat is in discomfort, or just cannot get to the tray or outdoors in time. As mentioned previously, cats that start to urinate inappropriately in the house should be examined by a vet, especially if you notice your cat straining (*if non-productive straining then this can become an emergency situation so seek prompt veterinary advice*), or passing small amounts of urine frequently. **Feline Idiopathic Cystitis (FIC)** is a stress-related urinary tract disease, with a common symptom being urination outside the litter tray. Any urinary tract discomfort can make a cat urinate when standing rather than attempting to go outside or to the litter tray, and this may sometimes be confused with spraying. Any illness or pain can be associated with house soiling, so an early examination by a vet is essential, with successful treatment usually resulting in a cat's return to normal toilet patterns. Occasionally cats will continue to soil if they have experienced discomfort in the original tray so providing an additional litter tray elsewhere can encourage use.

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OLD AGE

Older cats may not want to venture out in bad weather or may have issues using the cat flap because of stiff joints. As cats become older, they also become more insecure and may feel threatened by the presence of other cats in their territory. Most elderly cats will at some stage, require safe and accessible toilet facilities indoors, even if they have regularly toileted outdoors. There are many medical disorders of elderly cats that can lead to inappropriate urination – so again, an examination by a vet should be carried out.

FEAR OR ANXIETY

Cats are at their most vulnerable to attack when they are urinating or defaecating outside, so if they feel threatened, it may deter them from doing so. Other cats are usually the biggest problem, but it could be the neighbour's dog or even a sudden loud noise. The provision of a discreet litter tray indoors will take away the feelings of anxiety and the need for the cat to make a conscious decision to find a suitable toilet site. Accompanying the cat on visits to the garden may encourage it to eliminate outside again. The cat may normally have chosen to toilet well away from its home so it may be beneficial to make its own garden more appealing. Create an area in a quiet corner relatively close to the house (*for ease of escape back indoors*), and mix a high proportion of peat-free soil or sand into the earth.

REMOVAL OF PREVIOUSLY USED LATRINE SITE

Cats can be creatures of habit in their choice of elimination sites and redesigning a garden can have a serious impact on their behaviour. Always ensure that changes to the garden incorporate an area that can be comfortably used by your cat as a latrine (*well dug over earth*), and if you are aware of your cat's favoured site then attempting to preserve it would be ideal.

PRESENCE OF STRANGERS

Occasionally a cat will urinate or defaecate inappropriately if strangers are in the home and access to the litter tray or outdoors would require the cat to pass through the same room as the visitor. Some cats suffer from **"home alone"** anxieties when their owners go away and leave them to defend the house by themselves. The presence of a stranger caring for them can cause some cats to feel intensely threatened and subsequently "mark" an area, particularly the owner's bed, which has a strong familiar and reassuring scent. If your cat is particularly nervous of strangers, especially young children, it may be beneficial to provide an indoor litter tray in the room where the cat seeks refuge just in case it gets "caught-short". The best way to avoid "home alone" soiling is to keep the bedroom door shut and try to get familiar people to care for your cat in your absence. Some cats are particularly prone to the stress of being left behind and they actually benefit from a visit to a reputable and caring boarding cattery.

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