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Litter Box Woes

Approximately 10% of all cats at some point in their life will have an elimination problem. Whether this problem is not using the litter box completely, not defecating or urinating in the box, or just using the box occasionally. Once a cat avoids using their litter box it is imperative that they be seen as soon as possible by their veterinarian to rule out any medical issues that may be arising. The longer a cat inappropriately eliminates the more likely it is going to be a long standing problem, as they start to form a preference to other areas.

Why did my cat start going outside of the box?

- Aversion to the litter box
- Surface/Litter preferences
- Location preferences
- Medical Problems
- Behavioral Problems

Aversion to the Litter box

There are many reasons for a cat to find a litter box unpleasant. Remember a litter box is like using a Porta-Potty; no one wants to use the one that is smelly or has urine and feces spread around!

- The box is not clean enough (Some cat's standards on cleanliness vary just as we do as humans).
- Your cat has experienced pain while urinating or defecating in the box which was related to a previous medical issue.
- Your cat has been startled or scared while using the box in a certain area.
- Your cat can be disturbed while using the litter box (by another cat, dog, child, you or appliances).
- Your cat associates the box with punishment (if you yelled at your cat for eliminating outside of the box and then put them in the box, your cat associates the box with punishment).
- The box is uncomfortable due to being too small, or the sides are too high and your feline friend has developed a problem climbing up into the box.
- Not enough boxes in the house for the number of feline friends you have!

Suggestions:

- Scoop at least 2 times daily and change the litter out weekly; this means completely washing the box (try dawn dish soap or something mild with a minimal scent). This can vary depending on the number of cats and litter boxes you have in your household. If you can smell the box, you can count on the fact that you cat will not want to use it (It's a dirty Porta-potty!).
- Provide the preferred option of box, litter, and location to your felines (see more information on this below).
- Offer more than one exit from the litter box to prevent a cat being trapped or ambushed by other pets or children.

Surface/Litter Preferences

- Animals develop preferences to a particular surface early in life. Sometimes for unknown reasons these preferences can change. A surface preference can be noted if:
 - Your cat is eliminating on a certain textured surface (IE: Soft surfaces – carpet, bedding, and clothing).
 - The cat is found attempting to cover up the area by scratching, even if they are using the litter box.
 - The litter has a scent that is unpleasant (scented litters).
- Suggestions:
 - For a cat that is urinating on soft surfaces – use fine grain litter (like a scoopable litter) and add a soft rug underneath the litterbox.
 - For cats that are using slick/hard/smooth surfaces – try placing a thin layer of litter on the bottom of the box and leaving one end bare. Place on hard surface with no rug underneath.
 - If your cat has been outdoors and prefers soil – add soil to litter and gradually increase the amount of litter each week until converting completely.
 - Make the areas of previous elimination aversive – cover with aluminum foil, plastic.
 - Make sure to use unscented litters, as those floral/ocean scents that we like so much may actually be upsetting to your cat.

Location Preferences

- Just as in people some cats have a preference for the area where they eliminate. If you find your cat is doing the following this may be the case:
 - Your cat uses the same area to eliminate – but not in the box.
 - Eliminating in areas where there was a litter box or where there is the smell of urine.
 - Eliminating on a different level of the house than where the litter box is located.
- Suggestions:
 - Offer multiple litter boxes throughout the household on each floor level.
 - Make the area where the cat had been inappropriately eliminating not as pleasant – cover with aluminum foil, plastic.
 - Place a litter box in the location where they prefer to eliminate. You may be able to move it once they are using the litter box regularly. When moving the box make sure to do so gradually (inch by inch!).
 - Make sure that the box is in a quiet setting (away from appliances or high traffic areas), as well as away from anyone that may ambush them while in the box (kids, dog, other cats in the household).

Medical Problems → Seek Veterinary Attention!!

- Urinary Tract Infections (UTI)
 - If your cat has been urinating outside of the box, is straining to urinate, urinates small amounts, or vocalizes when attempting to urinate this may be the problem.
- Feline Idiopathic Cystitis (Previously known as FLUTD)
 - Cats with this have inflammation in their bladder and typically the reason is unknown – it may be correlated with stress in the household.
 - Signs: bloody urine, urinating outside of the box, appearing to strain to urinate, increase in the number of attempts to urinate.
 - Feline Idiopathic Cystitis can be difficult to treat but your veterinarian will work with you.
- Kidney/Bladder Stones or Blockage
 - Cats that have these will strain to urinate, may have bloody urine and will form an aversion to the litter box because it becomes painful to urinate or defecate.
 - These cats need to have medical attention as soon as possible.

- If your cat is straining to urinate and is not able to pass urine this is a clinical emergency and they need to be seen **immediately**.
- Constipation
 - If your cat is having a hard time passing stool or the stool is very firm constipation is a possibility and they may need an enema.
 - This can happen if your cat's diet is not appropriate for them or they are not drinking enough water.

Behavioral Problems

- Urine Marking
 - If you are finding urine on walls or vertical surfaces, your cat is marking. Both male and female cats will mark. Typically the action you will see is that the cat will back up to an area and tail will be extending high and wiggling back and forth rapidly. This is typically a spray and not a large volume of urine on the floor.
 - Preferred marking areas are typically near heating vents and electrical outlets.
 - If you find that your cat is marking, it is important to clean the area thoroughly using a product like Urine Away or Nature's Miracle. The cleaner needs to be non-ammonia based.
 - If your cat is marking – there are few things that may be occurring; household problems between cats and seeing outdoor cats, for example.
- Inter-cat aggression/stress
 - Some cats can be bullies! It may be as subtle as one cat walking into a room looking at the other cat, which causes the cat that was in the room to leave.
 - To reduce stress add Feliway diffusers throughout the household. Try to create a uniform scent (taking a damp washcloth and wiping each cats cheek and making sure to come back to the cat you started with). These methods may reduce stress and encourage a cat to feel more comfortable with its housemate.

General Rules and Guidelines

1. Spitefulness
 - Cats don't do things out of spite because something you have done has "offended" or "angered" them. So it is not advised to scold a cat for eliminating inappropriately.
 - If you find the cat inappropriately eliminating, subtly pick them up and place them gently in the litter box.
2. Cleaning Soiled Areas
 - Make sure to check all areas for urine stains or odor – they can be visualized using a black light as well.
 - Clean washable items using 1lb. of baking soda added to regular detergent. Air dry. Or use an enzymatic cleaner.
 - If wood furniture, walls or baseboards have been damaged, the varnish should be removed or they may need to be painted or replaced.
 - Use enzymatic cleaners (Urine away, Nature's Miracle) to remove urine from carpeting or other soft areas.
3. Location!!
 - If you have older cats you may need to have the litter box on the same floor level where the food and water are kept as these cats may have difficulty climbing stairs.

- Make sure that the litter box is in an area of reduced traffic, not next to appliances.
 - The litter box should be conveniently located for your cat and always accessible.
 - Food and water dishes should never be in the same room.
4. Litter
- Most cats prefer unscented, clumping (fine-grained) litters. Scoopable litters usually are finer grained than non-clumping.
 - Once you have a litter that your cat likes don't change brands.
 - Don't place air fresheners or misters near the litter box.
 - Make sure to clean the litter box out at least daily and washing the entire box out weekly.
5. Number of boxes
- For every 1 cat in the household you should have 1 additional litter box in the household.
 - They should be on different floors in the house.
 - Having several boxes in 1 room lined up essentially only qualifies as 1 large litter box.
 - You will notice that some cats will form a preference for which litter boxes they use and this is completely normal.
6. Litter box types
- AVOID automatic litter boxes they tend to scare cats with their cleaning mechanisms.
 - The box should be 1 ½ times the length of the cat when standing, high enough to hold 1-2 inches of litter but not too high as the cat needs to be able to climb easily into and out of the box.
 - Enclosed boxes can cause problems as cats prefer to be able to look around their surroundings. Decreased ventilation, less space to turn around or dig, and ambushing by other animals may also be a problem.
7. Liners
- Some cats don't mind liners while others do. You will have to figure out what your cat prefers. If you do use a liner make sure that it is anchored in place.
8. Long hair
- Long hair cats tend to be more affected by litter box problems vs. short hair cats.
 - These cats can have litter that gets stuck in the hair if it is wet or around the rear area and may cause problems. Make sure they are well groomed and hair clipped appropriately.
9. Preference Tests (How do I tell what my cat likes?)
- Ex: You have 3 litter boxes (B1, B2, B3). You want to test 3 litter types/brands (L1, L2, L3). The test will take appx. 3 weeks:
 - Week 1: Place litter 1 (L1) into box 1 (B1), L2 into B2, L3 into B3.
 - Week 2: Change to: B1 and L2, B2 and L3, B3 and L1.
 - Week 3: Change to: B1 and L3, B2 and L1, B3 and L2.
 - During this time keep a log of the litter used in each box, cleaning schedule (scooping and completely cleaning), number of times cat the urinated and defecated in each box. Try to eliminate as many variables as possible.

Resources:

- Adapted from University of Minnesota Veterinary Medical Center Behavior Science – “Litter Box Problems” handout. (Phone number: 612-626-VETS or 612-624-0797).
- Adapted from: <http://www.aspc.org/pet-care/virtual-pet-behaviorist/cat-behavior/litter-box-problems>