

# Elimination Problems in Cats

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## BASIC INFORMATION

### Description

Elimination problems are the most common behavior problems of cats. They involve voluntary urination, defecation, or both, outside the litter box and expression of urine while marking (spraying). Pet cats may mark with feces (middening), but this occurs rarely.

Any age, sex, or breed of cat may be affected, but long-haired cats may have an increased tendency for inappropriate defecation. Intact males spray urine the most, followed by neutered males and then intact and spayed females.

### Causes

Behavioral causes of elimination problems include inappropriate elimination or toileting, urine marking, separation anxiety, and occasionally other types of fears. Medical abnormalities can also cause eliminations outside the litter box. Cats do not urinate, defecate, or urine mark out of spite.

- Inappropriate elimination is a common cause and often results from an aversion to something associated with the litter or litter box, or from an attraction or preference for something outside the litter box.
- Cats can have an aversion to the litter, the litter box, or the location of the litter box. Litter aversion may be related to texture or scent of the litter, presence of a deodorizer, depth of litter, inadequate cleaning, or a previous negative experience (such as pain or fear) associated with the litter.
- Litter box aversion may be related to the type (open, covered, self-cleaning) or size of the box, location of the box (high traffic area, isolated, poor accessibility, vulnerable to surprise attacks by other cats), presence or absence of a liner, type or scent of cleaner used in the box, and previous negative experiences.
- Conversely, cats may seek other surfaces and locations for elimination because of a preference for a particular surface or association of a specific type of surface or location with the act of eliminating. Fabric is a commonly chosen alternative surface.
- Urine marking is normal cat communication behavior. It may be motivated by sexual, territorial, or conflict situations involving other cats, and it may be triggered by social and environmental factors such as residual urine odors, unfamiliar odors, or the presence of unfamiliar animals or people. Cats outside the home may trigger spraying around doors, windows, air vents, and fireplaces. The more cats in a household, the greater the probability that spraying will occur.

### Clinical Signs

Inappropriate elimination involves evacuation of a normal volume of urine or feces on a horizontal surface while the cat is in a squatting posture. Signs of litter or litter box aversion include complete avoidance of the litter, approaching the box hesitantly, perching on the edge of the box, not scratching in the litter, spraying while in the litter box, eliminating just outside the box, quickly running away from the box, and shaking of paws or meowing on exiting the box.

- A surface preference is suspected when a cat predominantly eliminates on a particular type of surface; a location preference is suggested when a cat frequently eliminates in one room or region of a room.
- Inappropriate elimination due to separation anxiety is suspected if the elimination occurs in the owner's absence. Urinating on the owner's bed is a common manifestation of separation anxiety.

Urine marking involves expression of a small volume of urine on a vertical surface by a cat in a standing position with a raised, quivering tail. Less commonly, cats may mark while squatting. Urine may be sprayed on established marking posts or on sites or objects that have social significance.

### Diagnostic Tests

A thorough examination and routine laboratory tests are done, and additional laboratory tests, x-rays, and other imaging procedures may be recommended depending on the initial findings. After medical problems are excluded, behavioral diagnoses and treatment rely on descriptions of the behavioral problem and historical information.

Be sure to relay all pertinent information, such as the duration and frequency of the occurrences, location of the elimination, litter box information, relationships with other pets and people in the household, correction methods that have been tried, and medications being administered. Drawing a diagram of the floor plan of the house and indicating the locations and surfaces upon which elimination is occurring, as well as the locations of windows, doors, food and water bowls, and litter boxes, is often helpful.

In multiple-cat households, it must be determined which cat or cats are involved. Isolating the cats one at a time may reveal which one is responsible. Sometimes, a fluorescein chemical is given or scrapings of different-colored nontoxic crayons are placed into each cat's food to identify which cat is urinating or defecating inappropriately.

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# Elimination Problems in Cats—*cont'd*

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## TREATMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

### Treatment Options

Treatment of inappropriate elimination or toileting involves increasing the appeal of the litter and litter box while decreasing the attractiveness and/or accessibility of the inappropriate location.

- Inadequate cleaning of the litter is a common reason for inappropriate elimination. Scooping and refreshing of litter should be done at least once daily, and fastidious cats may require more frequent scooping. Litter boxes are completely emptied and washed with plain soap (no fragrance) and hot water at least once weekly. In multiple-cat households, provide one box per cat, plus one extra box. Disperse the boxes throughout the home. Make the boxes easily accessible, but do not place them where the cat may be startled by household activities or other pets.
- For litter or litter box aversion, provide the cat with a different type of litter and box. In general, cats prefer scoopable, finely granular litter that has no scent, as well as open boxes. Individual cats vary in their preferences, so systematic trials may be required. Providing a smorgasbord of litter choices may be necessary to identify the type of litter most appealing to the cat.
- Large and overweight cats need boxes that are larger than the typical commercial litter box.
- Trimming hair between footpads, under the tail, and around the rear end of long-haired cats helps prevent litter and stool from attaching to the hair.
- For a surface preference, place the preferred type of surface temporarily in the litter box to re-establish the habit of using the box. For a location preference, either place the box at the preferred location; block the cat from that location; or make the location less appealing by covering it with a surface that is aversive or by applying an unappealing scent (such as citrus-scented air freshener).
- Clean inappropriate sites of elimination thoroughly with plain soap and water, and apply an effective odor eliminator. Avoid ammonia-based cleaners.
- If the cat is not using a litter box because of separation anxiety, fear, or anxiety or conflict with another cat, then those behavioral issues must also be addressed. Antianxiety medication may also be recommended to reduce arousal and anxiety associated with conflict and stress.
- Punishment is not helpful. Scolding or punishing the cat and then putting it in the litter box is especially detrimental and

increases the likelihood that the cat will permanently avoid the litter box in the future.

Urine marking is treated by reducing the motivation for spraying and managing any environmental and social triggers:

- Neutering decreases spraying in 90% of intact males and in 95% of intact females.
- Reducing the number of cats in a multi-cat household also decreases the incidence of spraying; however, this is not always an acceptable treatment. Alternatively, try to treat the conflicts among household cats. (See handout on **Aggression Among Household Cats**.)
- Triggers from outside cats may be reduced by blocking the inside cat's view of the outside and by discouraging outside cats through the use of repellents such as *The Scarecrow*, a motion-activated water sprinkler.
- A urine odor eliminator is also used to remove residual urine odor from sites that have been sprayed. Placement of citrus-scented air fresheners may help break the habit of spraying on a particular spot. *Feliway* (a synthetic facial pheromone available as a plug-in diffuser and as a spray) may induce a cat to mark by facial rubbing rather than spraying. Providing scratching posts near a spraying site may stimulate marking by scratching instead of spraying.
- Adequate litter box cleaning helps reduce anxiety about the box that may trigger spraying in some cats.
- Antianxiety medication may be recommended to relieve anxiety associated with conflict. Punishment is counterproductive and only increases the cat's anxiety, which has the potential of increasing spraying.

### Follow-up Care

Usually, when treating elimination problems in cats, a plan is developed for a few initial changes or treatments, and the cat's response is monitored for at least 1-2 weeks to determine the success of the plan. Based on the effectiveness of the initial plan, additional treatments may be recommended. If behavioral drugs are prescribed, monitoring is needed for adverse side effects, and follow-up laboratory tests may be recommended.

### Prognosis

Response to appropriate, systematic treatment is often favorable, especially in uncomplicated cases, although gradual improvement over several days to weeks is more likely than an immediate response. Treatment outcomes are less favorable when the diagnosis or contributing factors have not been correctly identified or when treatments are randomly applied.