

Inappropriate Toileting in Cats

Cats have a reputation for being very clean, but sometimes they will develop a habit of toileting away from the litter tray, either urinating, soiling, or both. This is distressing for the cat and their owners and often leads to the cat being rehomed or taken to a rescue centre. The following is a basic guide to toileting problems and offers some practical advice about how to avoid and manage the problem.

The Causes

Soiling or spraying away from the litter tray can be caused by the following:

- A health problem
- A problem with the litter trays in the home
- Stress

Health Problems

The sudden onset of inappropriate toileting away from the tray can be a sign of ill health in a cat. Urinary tract infections and irritable bowel are two health conditions which can lead to urinating and soiling around the home, as the cat begins to associate using the litter tray with pain and discomfort.

In all cases of inappropriate toileting a vet check is essential, to rule out any medical reason for the behaviour. So in the first instance make an appointment with your vet and ensure you describe your cat's behaviour to them fully, including when the problem started.

In the case of health related toileting issues, successful treatment will generally result in the cat returning to normal litter tray habits.

Once a health problem has been ruled out, it is time to look at other reasons for the toileting habits of your cat.

Litter tray Problems

Many problems are caused by poor management of the trays, provision of the wrong litter, poor placement in the home etc. Some cats just prefer another substrate in which to toilet, such as carpet, bedding etc. They will toilet onto horizontal surfaces and will produce normal amounts of urine or faeces.

There are a few golden rules when providing litter trays, which will help minimise the chance of inappropriate toileting and may help correct existing problems.

- **Type of Tray:** Provide large, deep trays. Some cats like hooded trays, others prefer open trays. If you are not sure which your cat likes, offer both and observe which tray your cat favours.
- **Type of Litter:** The type of litter you use depends on what best suits you and your cat. However, avoid perfumed litters, as this can actually cause the cat to dislike the tray. The texture of the litter is important too. Soft litters, which are easy to dig in and gentle on paws are favoured by cats, for example Cats Best or Worlds Best. Fill the tray to a depth of 8 -10cm (3-4 inches). Avoid the use of liners or litter deodorisers, as cats can be put off by these.
- **How many Trays:** The golden rule is one tray per cat, plus one. So even a single cat will need to be provided with a minimum of two trays. This is important, as some cats do not like to urinate and defecate in the same tray.
- **Positioning your trays:** Cats like privacy when toileting, so litter trays should be sited in quiet areas of the home, which are easily accessed by your cat, but where they will not be disturbed, by people or noise. If you have a home with more than one floor, then ensure you provide a tray at each level. Always place litter trays as far from food and water bowls as possible, as cats do not like to toilet near their food.
- **Keep your trays clean:** Cats will sometimes refuse to use dirty, smelly trays. Remove soiled litter at least twice a day, more often if you can. Once or twice a week, completely change the litter, washing the tray well with solution of bleach or pet safe disinfectant, such as Trigene or Formula H. (Warning: Disinfectants that turn cloudy in water, such as Dettol or Jeyes are extremely poisonous to cats, so never use them) Rinse and dry the tray well.

Kittens

If you have just taken on a new kitten, toileting problems may just be caused by lack of litter training or confusion on the part of the kitten. So, begin by confining your kitten to one room, making sure you provide at least two litter trays, along with their food, water, bed, toys etc. Always place the trays as far from the food and water bowls as possible. With young kittens it is important to reinforce good litter tray habits, by placing them into the tray if you see them attempting to toilet in other areas. Also, place your kitten in the litter tray, after each meal.

Once your kitten is using their tray reliably, then you can allow them access to more of the home, but it is important to provide several trays, placed around the home so that they have a tray available to them, when they feel the urge. Do not confuse them by moving the trays, once you have positioned them, leave them. As your kitten gets older, you may find they have favourite trays, in which case you can remove the ones they do not use.

Adopting an Older cat

Older cats can have poor litter tray habits due to poor training, which has never been corrected, or because they are unsure of where the trays are in the new home. In this case, confinement, just as for a kitten can help.

When confining any cat or kitten it is important that you give them lots of attention. Confinement is based around retraining and not punishment, so make sure they still feel loved.

Multi-cat Homes

Inappropriate toileting is quite common in homes where several cats live. Many cats do not like to share trays with others and in some cases there can be an issue of dominance, whereby the top cat tries to prevent other cats gaining access to the litter tray. It is important to provide enough trays in a multicat home. The general rule is a minimum of one tray per cat, plus one, so in a home with four cats, for example, a minimum of five litter trays will be needed. Place them around the home, in quiet areas and once you have sited them, leave them and do not move them around.

Stress

If inappropriate toileting is not related to a health problem or a problem with the litter trays provided, then stress may be the cause. Cats can easily become stressed, by even the smallest changes in the home. A stressed cat may appear well and happy to its owner, but if a stress related toileting problem arises, then your cat is feeling anxious and unsettled in its environment. Stress in cats can be caused by many factors, including changes in the home, such as decorating, new furniture, new carpets, the birth of a baby, the introduction of another cat, a dog coming to live in the home etc. Cats can also become unsettled and feel threatened by other cats in the neighbourhood hanging about close to external doors, noise coming from the wider environment, such as building work etc. Multi-cat households can have higher levels of stress too.

Stress related toileting generally centres around the cat marking their territory to make themselves feel more secure or to send out a chemical message of dominance, particularly if another cat is in the home, or they feel threatened by cats outside of the home. They will tend to spray urine up vertical surfaces, such as walls and doors and may mark close to entrances to the home.

It is important to try and identify the cause of the stress, before you can take any steps to try and minimise the problem.

- Confinement, as discussed above, may help your cat to feel more secure and reinforce good litter tray habits, but be careful not to make the cat feel like it is being punished. Once the cat is using the tray reliably, then reintroduce them to the home and observe closely.

- Provide your cat with quiet areas, where they can feel secure. The provision of high cat trees, with places for relaxing and sleeping, can help in minimising stress. Once your cat has settled in its chosen quiet spot, ensure children, other pets etc. are not allowed to disturb them.
- In the case of multi-cat households ensure you provide enough litter trays, bowls of food and water, sleeping area etc. so that they do not have to compete.
- If the problem is neighbourhood cats, then find ways to discourage those cats from coming close to your doors and windows. You can obtain safe cat deterrents from garden centres etc. but ground pepper can be just as good or failing that a squirt from a water spray.
- Work to improve your cat's confidence, by playing with them regularly and chatting to them in a gentle, low voice. Give positive praise when your cat does use the litter tray.
- The use of the product Feliway can be useful for some cats, who respond well. Feliway contains synthetic cat pheromones, which can bring about a sense of calm to cats. It is available as a spray and as a plug in diffuser, from your vet, or online. Follow the manufacturer's instructions when using this product, to gain the maximum benefit.
- **Never, ever** punish your cat or shout at them. This will only ever exacerbate the problem.

Cleaning the Affected Areas

Whatever the cause of the inappropriate toileting, correct cleaning of the soiled area is paramount. Clean to us, does not mean clean to a cat and if they can still smell traces of their scent, they may be attracted back to toilet in that area. Some cleaners, particularly those containing ammonia, leave a residue which can also attract cats back to the area.

Always clean the area with a cat safe, enzyme based cleaner. Pet shops sell ready made products, such as Simple Solution, which is excellent at removing stains and odours and if used, according to the directions, will completely remove all traces of urine and faeces, so the area is properly clean.

An alternative cleaning method is to use a warm solution of water and biological washing powder or liquid (Non bio does not work as it does not contain enzymes). Wash the affected area with the biological solution and once it is dry, spray the area with surgical spirit (not white spirit). Leave to dry before allowing your cat access to the area.

(Warning: Please test an inconspicuous area for colour fastness, shrinkage etc. before cleaning the entire affected area.)