

Feline Inappropriate Elimination (FIE)

Probably one of the most common reasons cats lose their homes – urinating and defecating outside of the litter box. There are two primary reasons for this – medical, and behavioral. Medical can range from urinary tract infection or inflammation, to metabolic diseases such as hyperthyroidism and kidney disease, and probably 80% of FIE is medical in origin. Behavioral can range from stress from factors inside the home, to a dislike of the type of litter or litter box. If your cat is urinating or defecating outside of the box, the first thing to do is to rule out a medical problem. This consists of a physical exam, a urinalysis, blood work, a blood pressure check, and possibly an x-ray. If no medical cause is found, then we look at behavioral causes, which is what this handout is about.

Substrate Aversion. Your cat may not like the litter you buy. There have been scientific studies on what type of litter cats prefer. The overall consensus is clumping, non-scented, carbon based clay litters. But, no two cats are exactly alike, and some prefer different types of litters. Some of the other litters you might want to try are:

- **Recycled cardboard or newspaper litters.** If your cat prefers softer things to go on such as towels and bathmats, then this may be a litter worth trying.
- **Pearl litters.** These can also appeal to cats that prefer a softer litter.
- **Non-clumping litters.** Some cats don't like the way clumping litters can retain the smell of urine after being scooped, but still prefer clay litters, so going with a non-clumping clay litter and just dumping it weekly may work.
- **Dirt.** For cats that have been outdoors, you might consider trying potting soil in the litter box and dumping it regularly, or you can also try mixing dirt with a clay litter. Just be warned, any potted plants on the floor in the home might now become litter boxes if you start doing this.
- **Disposable diaper training pads.** For cats that prefer soft things to urinate on, you can also try putting disposable diaper training pads used for house training puppies in the litter box, and changing them daily.

Litterbox Aversion. Cats can stop using a litter box for many reasons, and some of these are the litter box itself. If your cat feels threatened while in the litter box, either from noises or smells, or from other pets in the home, they may stop using that litter box. There are things you can do to make the litter box more appealing.

- **Get rid of the cover.** Most cats do not like covered litter boxes. They seal in smells (which of course, is why we like them), and can keep a cat from being able to see any potential threats coming at them.
- **Get a bigger litter box.** Cats like to be able to turn around comfortably in a litter box and have room to bury their eliminations. The ideal litter box is as wide as the length of your cat, and as long as your cat from nose to tip of tail.

- Most litter boxes do not fit this size. But, you can make your own very inexpensive large litter box by taking a Rubbermaid storage tub that is at least 2 feet long and 1.5 feet across with sides that are about a foot high, and make that into a litter box. Just cut an opening on one side so your cat doesn't have to jump a foot to get in. In addition, the high sides will keep your cat from kicking litter everywhere or urinating over the side, but yet they can still see around them for potential threats. If you are concerned about appearances, keep the lid, and put it on only when you have guests over, then take it off when they are gone.
- We have had a lot of cats that had stopped using the litter box go back to it just by getting a larger litter box.
- **Move the location of your litter box.** If your litter box is in an area that is dark, and has loud scary noises such as a furnace turning on or a washer or dryer making noises, then your cat may be too afraid to go and use it. Move the box to another location where it is not scary. If you live in a very small home and don't have any other areas, then you might consider putting the litter box in a closet, and keeping the door open other than when you have company over.
- **Get more litter boxes in different areas of the home.** The rule is you should have however many litter boxes as you have cats, plus one. So, if you have 2 cats, you should have 3 litter boxes. This is because most cats do not want to use a litter box that another cat has recently used, so this gives them more options. In addition, the more spread out you can have the litter boxes, the more likely your cat will use them rather than go all the way across the home, and downstairs, to use a litter box.
- **Change out your litter boxes at least once a year.** Every time your cat scratches in the litter box, or you clean your litter box, little scratches are made in the plastic, and urine and odors will sink into these scratches, and cannot be eliminated.
- **Clean your litter box regularly with hot water and mild soap.** Do not use scented cleaners or bleach, as these may repel your cat from using the box.
- While the idea of self cleaning litter boxes sure sounds good, some cats are afraid of these boxes because of the motorized sounds and movements. If you have one of these, and your cat won't use it, it might be time to go back to a regular litter box.

Cleanliness. Some cats are just really finicky when it comes to having clean litter, and will only use it if it is clean. If you have a cat that only seems to use the box when it is clean, and goes next to it if it is not, then you may need to clean the box more often.

- For these cats, clumping litters are generally good, as you can scoop them daily, twice daily, or three times daily so they always have clean litter, and then dump the scoopable litter weekly or every other week to avoid smells hanging on.
- This type of cat may also benefit from self cleaning litter boxes.
- Multiple litter boxes will help to increase the chance of having a clean litter box available.

Outside Stressors. This usually consists of other cats or dogs in the home, but can also include young children. If your cat is being tormented when they go into the litter box by another pet or child, then that can very quickly get your cat to stop using that litter box.

- If **another cat** is the problem, then having multiple litter boxes in different areas of the house will help. If the other cat is tormenting the cat that is not using the litter box both in and out of the litter box, then other behavioral modification may be required – talk with us about that, and we can discuss options.
- If **a dog** in the house is the source of the problem, then put the litter box in a room that has a baby gate in the door way that allows your cat to get into the room, but not the dog. This is also a way to keep your cat's food away from a dog as well.
- If **children** in the home are the problem, then baby gates may work also. In extreme cases, a locked door to a room with a cat door installed in the door may be a solution. That not only gives your cat a room to eliminate in privately, but also a room to escape to if needed.

Smells. If your cat, or another previous cat has urinated in a specific area, your cat may smell that, assume that it means that is an elimination area, and eliminate in the same spot.

- **Effective cleaning.** The first thing is to clean up as best you can the area that has been urinated on with an enzymatic cleaner designed for cat urine. You will have to soak it in – keep in mind that when the cat urinated in that area, they left about a ½ cup of urine that soaked down through the carpet into the floorboards. So, you will have to do the same or more with the enzymatic cleaner to penetrate into everything the urine soaked into.
 - If you are not sure where the urine spots are, you can get a black light, the stronger the better, and when it is pitch black in the room, go over it with the black light. Keep in mind, any type of bodily waste; cat, dog or person will show up with the blacklight.
 - You may also want to test the enzymatic cleaner on a area of carpet that is not in plain view in the event that it discolors your carpet.
 - Bleach will also work very well to inactivate the urine smells, but very few surfaces can tolerate bleach without significant color change or bleaching effects, and if you do use bleach, make sure the area is well ventilated as the fumes given off are slightly toxic initially.
- **Cover the remaining scent.** After you have used an enzymatic cleaner on the area and really soaked it in, then cover the area for 24 hours with plastic to help it saturate in, then remove the plastic and let it air dry. Next, repeat the same thing, but this time with something that is very sweet and strong smelling to help cover any residual urine smells. Examples include vanilla or peppermint extract, mint mouthwash, Odo-Ban, or anything that you can think of that is non-toxic that has a very strong sweet odor that will linger.
- **Obstacles to remarking.** After both cleaning with an enzymatic cleaner, and following with a strong scent, then either place a piece of furniture over the area, or heavy duty carpet vinyl to minimize the chance of your cat going back to that area for whatever reason it was used in the first place.

Stress. Cats are very routine oriented. They like every day to be the exact same, with the same routine, etc. Anything that upsets that routine can upset your cat. If the upset is significant enough, then your cat may act out by urinating on something that smells like you or another person, such as your bed, clothing, furniture, etc.

- **Short term.** If the change in routine is temporary, then by eliminating the smells left behind and getting back into a regular routine may fix the problem. Short term anti-anxiety medications may be required to help facilitate the adjustment.
- **Long term.** If the change is more permanent, such as a new person moving into the house and your cat is having a hard time adjusting, longer term anti-anxiety medications may be required.
- **Boredom** or lack of a feline friendly environment can also cause stress in cats. Lack of stimulation can result in destructive behavior, which can include FIE. Increasing stimulation can help significantly, whether it involves letting your cat go outside in a safe manner, or increasing stimulation inside the home. A very good website on increasing stimulation inside the home is www.indoorcat.org.
- **Medical.** Many causes of stress in cats can be medical, which is why it is always good to thoroughly rule out medical causes before embarking on behavior modification.

Behavior Modification. While cats can be trained, they are not quite the same as dogs in response to training, and in most cases, it is easier to rearrange your home to accommodate your cat, rather than training them to accommodate you. There are some things that you can do to help encourage your cat to use the litter box.

- If you catch your cat using the litter box, wait until they are done, and then praise them and give them a treat.
- Never ever hit your cat for going somewhere other than the litter box, or rub their nose in the urine. All they will do is learn to fear you, which will increase the FIE. If you catch your cat going somewhere other than the litter box, do something to scare them (not hurt them) while they are in the act. Examples include:
 - Spraying your cat with a squirt gun or spray bottle.
 - Shaking a glass jar full of change or nuts and bolts – cats don't tend to like the noise.
 - Say NO in a very loud voice.
 - Throw something non hurtful close to them, such as a pencil or bean bag. You don't want to hit them, but if you can have it land close to them, that may scare them and keep them from going in that area again.
- Again, it is generally more effective to find the reason first, and then treat that reason, than to try and do behavior modification. Behavior modification in conjunction with the other suggestions in this handout will be more likely to be successful.

Before you give up on your cat, please go through and try some of the things listed here. 95% of cats that have FIE from a behavioral reason can be treated successfully and start using the litter box again. If nothing else works, we can always try anti-anxiety medication long term, of which we have several options.

If you have any questions or concerns on any of the above, please feel free to contact us at All Feline Hospital at 402-467-2711 or info@allfelinehospital.com.