



HELP! MY CAT IS GOING OUTSIDE OF THE BOX!

INAPPROPRIATE ELIMINATION, MARKING, AND OTHER CAUSES OF FAILURE TO USE THE BOX

One of the most common behavioral and health problems cats have is eliminating outside the box. In some cats, this is a sign of urinary tract problems, such as urinary tract infection, increased urine production (diseases like diabetes, and many others, cause this), urinary pain from crystals/stones and other primary urinary problems. For defecating outside the box, it may be a sign of bowel discomfort due to constipation or diarrhea.

For cats with urine marking, the problem may be a sign of anxiety or stress in the cat and respond to medication for anxiety. For cats with inappropriate elimination, which is neither marking nor medical, improving the nature of the litter box and retraining their habits is key. For some of these cat, anxiety is also a component. In older cats, especially over the age of 12, arthritis may make traveling to or entering the box uncomfortable, motivating the cat to go in other places.

The first step in evaluating this disorder is to take a detailed history about what the cat is doing, where and how often, and including any changes in the household (such as changes in family members or pets living at home, changes in where the cats live, home construction projects etc.).

Next, a full physical exam and urinalysis is performed to help determine whether there is a medical cause for the signs. If there is a medical cause, it is critical to treat it. This may require medication for a short time or for life if the cat has a chronic disease. In most cases, the cats do best on a canned food diet which helps them have good nutrition, more water intake, and a healthy weight. Your vet may prescribe a specific canned food if your cat has a urinary tract problem.

If your cat has no urinary tract infections, crystals or other abnormalities, the most common cause (behavior sometimes in conjunction with anxiety /stress) is likely the culprit. For these cats, behavioral modification using confinement so that they only have one place to eliminate (the litter box) is highly effective in getting the cat to resume consistent litter box use.

This may also require making changes to reduce the availability of other places your cat is currently using (picking up throw rugs, putting laundry in closed bins, etc.) to help change the cat's habits. For some cats, especially those in which we can identify that anxiety is definitely the cause, we may also use medication to reduce their anxiety. since treating the underlying cause is the best way to solve the problem.

However, even if your cat is on anti-anxiety medication it will work best in conjunction with the behavior medication plan. We do not know why some cats become stressed by what may seem like a small change in their household, especially since other people and cats in the house may not show similar signs of stress. However, we do know that cats which show this pattern of inappropriate elimination as a response to anxiety may do so repeatedly.

Further, once a cat starts using an inappropriate place to urinate or defecate, it may become a habit, or attract other cats to use that place inappropriately also. Therefore, if any of your cats start to have inappropriate elimination, contact your vet promptly so we can start treatment and minimize the risk of ongoing property damage or bad habits developing.