

LITTER BOX USE AND AVOIDANCE

Dealing with a healthy cat that eliminates outside the litter box can be frustrating if you do not know why the problem exists or what to do about it. Putting your cat outdoors or putting him or her to sleep may be extreme measures you might wish to avoid.

Frequently, there are medical problems that will cause a cat to eliminate in inappropriate places. Not uncommonly, learned behaviors can continue long after the medical problems have been solved. Fortunately, many litter box avoidance problems can be resolved with simple management strategies by you.

WHAT ARE THE COMMON FORMS OF LITTER BOX AVOIDANCE? Some cats defecate outside the litter box but continue to urinate in the box. Others use the box to pass their stool but spray their urine outside the box. Other cats dribble urine inside and outside the box while assuming a squatting position.

WHAT IS MEANT BY SPRAYING URINE? When a cat backs up against a vertical object with its tail up, tip twitching, and forces a spray of urine against the object, he or she is spraying. If you do not actually observe this behavior, a clue that your cat is spraying is urine stain and odor on the walls, furniture legs, curtains, baseboards, or basement windows. Females and males may exhibit this unacceptable behavior, but it is more common in males.

WHAT CAN BE DONE? The cat should be evaluated by your veterinarian for urogenital problems if spraying or urinating outside the box is observed. He or she should also be examined for gastrointestinal problems if there is defecation outside the box. There are a number of medical conditions that can be the underlying cause of these behaviors. Do not be shy about discussing these problems with your veterinarian.

WHAT IS WRONG IF MY CAT CONTINUES LITTER BOX AVOIDANCE AFTER HE OR SHE IS HEALTHY AGAIN? Your cat may have learned inappropriate elimination during the time of illness, and strategies to correct this will require individualized attention from your veterinarian. If your cat is found to be healthy, there are other common causes for

inappropriate elimination.

WHAT ARE OTHER COMMON CAUSES?

A list without further explanation may be all you need to track the problem down and may well point you in the right direction toward solving litter box aversion.

- Insufficient cleaning of the litter.
- Aversion to the type of litter being used.
- Too many cats per litter box.
- Aversion to the litter box site.
- Preference for a non-litter substrate.
- Change in the environment, stress.
- Too few litter boxes for the size of your house.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD LITTER BE CHANGED AND WHAT ARE GOOD LITTER MEDIUMS?

Wet spots and feces should be removed either as soon as they appear or at least twice a day. Litter should be changed at least twice a week. The litter can be shallow if it is kept clean. Scented litter is not a substitute for cleaning, and some cats dislike scents. Most owners find their cats will accept commercial clay litter, but some have to resort to shredded newspaper, humus, or sand.

The new so-called "clumping" cat litter substrates are gaining in popularity with cat owners. When a cat urinates in a clumping litter, the urine forms a solid ball which can be easily scooped out of the litter pan. The solid waste is also easier to remove using a slotted scoop. The entire litter needs to be discarded at least every two months to keep it sanitary. If more than one cat uses the same litter box, common sense will dictate the frequency at which you replace the entire "clumping" litter.

HOW CAN I TELL IF MY CAT LIKES ITS LITTER?

You know your cat likes its litter if it spends a lot of time sniffing, pawing and pushing at it and burying his or her waste in it. If a cat dislikes the litter, it may go so far as perching on the edge of the box or keeping one or more paws on the floor, away from the litter, while eliminating.

ANY FURTHER QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE CAN BE ANSWERED BY CALLING OUR OFFICE.
PRACTICE OF VETERINARY MEDICINE, SURGERY AND DENTISTRY