



VETERINARY HOSPITAL & HOTEL

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DOES YOUR CAT URINATE OUTSIDE THE CATBOX?

Cats who urinate inappropriately can be very frustrating. With a little understanding of the reasons why our beloved cats begin doing this behavior, we can take positive steps toward finding a resolution.

Inappropriate urination can occur for two different reasons. It can indicate a *medical* problem or it can be a *behavioral* problem. Cats begin urinating outside the box as a response to something that is wrong, either with them or their environment. It is not just them “behaving badly” and cats don’t urinate inappropriately out of “spite”. It is unfair and ineffective to spend weeks or months blaming a cat for urinating inappropriately when it may not be his/her fault. As responsible pet owners, it is our duty to try to figure out what they are trying to tell us.

Cats can experience 4 different medical causes of inappropriate urination. It is a common misunderstanding that the only medical reason is a *bladder infection*. An infection, especially in cats with good kidney function, is rare. Cats commonly get a condition called *cystitis (sterile inflammation)*. This is thought to be caused by eating primarily dry foods. Some cats can also have *microscopic crystals* in their bladders that can cause irritation. These crystals are thought to be linked to a diet of primarily dry food, although the carbohydrate content (grains) in the diet can play a role by changing the pH of the urine from what it should be. Cats can have small *stones* in their bladder that cause chronic irritation.

Some of the above listed medical conditions can cause *intermittent* inappropriate urination. Most people think if a cat only exhibits signs occasionally, it is behavioral. This is not true. The only way to tell the difference between medical and behavioral causes is to have the urine checked by a veterinarian. Another common misconception is that only male cats spray, or spraying a vertical surface always indicates a behavioral issue. This is also not true. Female cats can spray just like males, and ANY urination outside the box should be checked with a urinalysis.

The most common symptoms of a *medical* problem are frequent attempts to urinate, more frequent visits to the cat box, producing smaller amounts of urine, taking longer to pass the urine (straining), crying during urination, licking the genital region a lot, or urinating outside the box. Every cat experiences a different level of discomfort and not all signs may be present. It is important to take any changes very seriously.

Male cats are especially susceptible to forming a urinary obstruction. If this happens it is a life-threatening emergency. If you are ever unsure if your cat is passing urine, and he is male, seek veterinary attention immediately.

True behavioral problems can often be solved by following these general rules:

1. You should always provide at least one box per cat.
2. These boxes should be in separate rooms in the house, not next to each other.
3. The boxes, or at least one box, should be uncovered.
4. The boxes should be the largest you can find. We prefer the plastic storage containers you can find in variety or home improvement stores.
5. We always prefer scoopable, unscented litter. The natural, scoopable litters are thought to be healthier than clay litter (i.e.: corn, wheat). Silica crystals are also acceptable and great for odor control.
6. The boxes should be scooped of all urine and feces at least daily (no exceptions).
7. The entire litter amount should be completely changed at least every 2 weeks because the clean looking litter will eventually absorb odor.
8. The boxes should be kept away from noisy appliances or ‘busy’ areas of the house.
9. Use appropriate odor control/cleaning methods in soiled areas (see below).
10. If you have more than one box, try different types of litter in each.

We can’t read our cat’s minds so we are much more successful at solving the problem by offering our cats choices. Addressing all 10 points above will make your chance at success greater.

The reason we always recommend at least one box per cat is to reduce perceived competition among cats. Even if your cats get along, if one is using the box or they have just had a sibling “spat”, there will always be an available box for the other one to choose from. This is the reason you should never keep all cat boxes right next to each other. Cats sometimes want privacy and their own space.

Covers were designed for human convenience. While some cats don’t mind them, most prefer to have a good view of their surroundings while eliminating. Covers can make them feel cornered. They also trap odors inside which can be distasteful to your cat.

Even jumbo cat boxes are too small for many cats. They need room to be able to move, dig an appropriate hole, squat, eliminate, and then cover. If they feel cramped or if they are older and arthritic, they may chose an easier location.

Cat’s toe pads are extremely sensitive, like our fingertips. Cats can be very opinionated about what texture of litter they prefer. Choosing something soft is usually best. Offering a choice of litter types will also help make sure they stay satisfied. We always recommend scoopable litters (except in the case of crystals) as these produce a cleaner cat box. The dust from clay litter can be unhealthy for the lungs. Scoopable litters such as Swheat Scoop (wheat) or World’s Best (corn) are a natural alternative to clumping unscented litters if your cat likes them.

The location of the box is also extremely important. The laundry room is the most common location. However, it can be extremely noisy and sometimes scary due to the washer, dryer, etc. Consider adding a box in a different location.

Normal cat urine will glow under a black light in a darkened room. This is an easy way to locate areas of inappropriate urination. The strongest, most effective odor removal product currently on the market is called Urine Off. It is not recommended to clean the area prior to using this product. It is available at many veterinary clinics, pet stores, and online.