

# WHEN THE CAT MISSES THE BOX

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Housoiling is the most common problem for which cat owners use my behavior consultation services. There are many reasons why a cat might miss the box, but since medical problems can be an underlying causes, a visit to your veterinarian should be your first step in resolving the problem. A urinalysis, fecal exam or blood tests may be recommended. Attempts at behavior modification will fail if an underlying medical problem is not corrected. Cats that housesoil can be lumped into two basic categories. Those that spray vertical surfaces with urine and those that eliminate inappropriately on horizontal surfaces.

## Urine Marking

Spraying occurs when a cat backs up to an upright surface and directs a stream of urine toward it. The objects that are commonly sprayed include doors, walls by doors or windows, new objects in the home, and furniture. This is a marking behavior. A cat may begin urine marking if it feels that its territory is being invaded, or if there is something in the pet's life that makes it anxious. Cats visiting in the yard or a social problem with another cat in the home can trigger a spraying problem. Unneutered males or females in heat are most likely to spray, but some neutered cats will take up this nasty little habit. The inclination to spray urine is influenced by a number of things pertaining to the individual (hormones, personality), environmental stimuli that are upsetting to the cat (new roommate, new cat in the neighborhood, remodeling, moving) and its relationship with the owners (change in the work schedule, absences from home, spending less time with the pet and inappropriate punishment).

## Treating Marking Problems

The first thing you want to try to do is get rid of the cause of the marking problem. You should try to discourage cats from visiting your yard. Anything in the yard that might attract them should be removed (bird feeders, garbage, food, etc.). If you can't do that, you might be able to prevent your cat from seeing outdoor cats by keeping it out of windows or closing the drapes. Urine should be cleaned from around doors and windows. If other cats in the household are contributing to the problem, the pets may need to be separated, or you may need a behavior consultant to sort out the social problems.

Neutering is a very successful way of stopping urine spraying. Ninety percent of males and ninety-five percent of females will not spray following castration or spaying. Medication is often necessary to control this behavior, and may be prescribed by your veterinarian if you have a particularly serious problem. If the cat is one that will respond to drugs, you should expect an improvement within one to two weeks. Once you see some progress, your veterinarian will probably want you to slowly wean the pet off of the drug. Now that newer, safer medications are available, hormones are infrequently used for spraying problems. Always be sure to discuss potential side effects with your veterinarian.

There is a relatively new product from France called FELIWAY® that is safe and easy to use. It contains synthetic feline facial pheromones, and when applied around the home will cause a decrease in urine spraying by most cats.

## Inappropriate Elimination

A cat will urinate on horizontal surfaces in inappropriate areas when there is a problem with its box or if there is a stronger attraction to other surfaces or areas around the home. To uncover the cause, you'll want to think back to when and where the housoiling began, and what occurred that were associated with the appearance of the problem. If the cat suddenly began urinating and defecating away from the box, it's likely that something about the litterbox is objectionable to the pet. A dirty box, disinfectant odor, unacceptable litter or a negative experience associated with the litterbox may have caused the pet to avoid it. The box may have been moved to an area with too much traffic. Cat's that have been repeatedly punished may start eliminating in secluded areas to avoid family members. Many medical conditions (bladder infection, constipation, diarrhea, diabetes, kidney disease, arthritis, senility) can cause litter box problems. Constipation or colitis can cause a cat to stop defecating in the litterbox, but continue to use it for urination.

## Treating Inappropriate Elimination

There are three important things you need to do: remove the cause of the problem, reestablish the habit of

litterbox use and prevent the cat from returning to previously soiled areas. The box may need to be cleaned more often and any rough handling in the box must be stopped. If the housesoiling occurs because the cat dislikes something about the litterbox or its location, an acceptable brand of litter may need to be found or the box may need to be moved. The results of a study of feline litter preferences suggested that important litter characteristics are texture, granularity, and coarseness. The cats in the study showed a definite preference for a finely textured clay litter. Dr. Elsey's Ultra Cat unscented litter has helped solve these problems in many households. As a rule of thumb, it's a good idea to provide at least one box per cat. The boxes should be scooped once or twice daily and emptied at least once each week. Avoid harsh-smelling disinfectants. If disinfectants are used, the box should be air-dried and out of operation for at least twenty-four hours. To protect the cat from being bothered by children or an annoying pet dog, the box can be placed in a quiet room with a cat door in the door to the room.

To reestablish a consistent habit of using the litterbox, the cat should be under supervision 100% of the time or should be confined to a small room with the box so that it never has the opportunity to housesoil. When confined to a relatively small area, most cats will choose to eliminate in the box rather than soiling the floor. It's then a matter of confining the cat long enough for a consistent habit to become established. Don't forget about the pet during the confinement period. Have frequent play and social sessions. Food rewards should be given immediately after the cat finishes eliminating in the box. Once the cat has used the litterbox in a confined area for several weeks or more, you can begin to allow more freedom in the home.

Previously soiled areas can be safeguarded by placing food bowls, bedding or toys in the areas. Covering an area with plastic, foil or double-stick carpet tape may prevent a cat from eliminating there. Access to the soiled areas can be denied by moving furniture or closing doors. In some areas, such as the corners of the basement, it may help to simply place a litterbox where the cat has been soiling. Motion-detector alarms may also be quite helpful for preventing the pet from eliminating in an undesirable area.

Removing the odor is important. Products that are formulated specifically to work on feline stool and urine odors should be used. These products need to make contact with the organic material and, in most cases, an ample amount should be poured on carpeting and porous surfaces, rather than lightly sprayed.

## **Punishment**

This is the least effective tool for controlling housesoiling and often makes the problem worse. Under no circumstances should you swat or physically punish the pet. Rubbing its nose in a mess is a definite "no no" as is roughly handling the pet and placing it in the litter box. If you catch the pet in the act of eliminating in an inappropriate area, squirt it with a water gun, toss an object near it, or make a sharp noise to interrupt the behavior without frightening it.