Feline inappropriate elimination is one of the most common behavioral complaints of cat owners and can involve either urine and/or faeces deposited outside of the litter tray. Marking behaviors such as spraying or urination of small amounts on horizontal surfaces are also common but have a different aetiology.

Could there be a medical reason that my cat is eliminating inappropriately?

Medical diseases of the urinary tract can cause inappropriate elimination. There are many such conditions, including stones and crystal formation in the bladder, bacterial infections, and a group of inflammatory diseases of the bladder and urinary tract of unknown origin that cause pain and an increased urgency to urinate. Diseases of the kidneys and liver can cause the cat to drink more and urinate more frequently. In addition, hormone disorders, such as hyperthyroidism and diabetes, and the condition of senility can lead to changes in elimination habits including house soiling. Medical problems that lead to difficulty or discomfort in passing faeces, poor control or an increased frequency of defecation could all contribute to house-soiling with faeces. Colitis, constipation, and anal sac diseases, are just a few of the medical problems that need to be ruled out when diagnosing the cause of inappropriate defecation. Another consideration is the pet's mobility and sensory function. Medical conditions affecting the nerves, muscles, or joints, could lead to enough discomfort, stiffness or weakness that the cat may not be able to get to the litter tray, climb into the litter tray, or get into a comfortable position for elimination.

In summary, if elimination is associated with pain or discomfort, or if access to the litter tray is difficult or uncomfortable the cat may begin to eliminate outside of the tray. In addition, those cats with increased frequency of elimination (especially if the litter tray is not cleaned more frequently) and those with decreased control may begin to soil the house. Consult your veterinary surgeon because a complete physical examination, urinalysis and in some cases additional diagnostic tests such as blood tests, radiographs or a urine culture, will be needed to rule out medical problems that could be causing or contributing to the cat’s elimination problem. Some problems may be transient or recurrent so that repeated tests may be needed to diagnose the problem.

What could be the problem if it is not medical?

Non-medical causes for elimination problems in cats include litter, litter tray, and location aversions, or preferences for certain areas. Frustration and other forms of stress can also
influence feline elimination behavior.

**How do we determine the behavioral cause?**

When all medical problems have been treated or ruled out and the house-soiling persists, a complete and comprehensive behavioral history will be necessary in order to establish a diagnosis and treatment plan. This includes information about the home environment, litter tray type and litter used, litter tray maintenance and placement, and the onset, frequency, duration and progression of problem elimination behaviors. Other factors to note include new pets in the household, any household changes that might have occurred around the time the problem began, and any patterns to the elimination such as the time of day, particular days of the week, or seasonal variations. Relationships between the soiling cat and other animals and people in the home need to be examined.

Other information required is whether the cat is using the litter tray at all, and the location of inappropriate elimination including types of surface, whether on horizontal or vertical surfaces, and whether it is urine, faeces or both. Such information will help differentiate between elimination and marking and assist in the selection of an appropriate treatment regime.

**How do I determine which cat is eliminating when there is more than one cat?**

When there are multiple cats in the home, it may be difficult to determine who is actually soiling. Confinement of one or more cats may be necessary to discover who is not using the litter tray. Alternatively a special dye can be administered to one cat, and the soiled areas can then be evaluated with a special light to determine if that is the cat that is house-soiling. Both of these products may be available from your veterinary surgeon.

**What factors should I look at to correct this problem?**

Two areas that need to be addressed are litter tray maintenance and litter tray location. Litter tray maintenance refers to how the tray is cleaned. For some cats, it is necessary to keep the litter tray scrupulously clean. This may mean changing the litter daily, but certainly removing faeces and soiled areas every day. The choice of litter material is important. Some cats prefer a plain Fuller's earth litter material, without any odour control chemicals added, whilst others prefer a fine sand like substrate and others shredded newspaper. Many of the modern litters clump and allow for frequent, easy litter tray cleaning. Cats may be reluctant to use the litter tray if it has been recently cleaned and deodorised, since the smell may be aversive to the cat. It is easy to underestimate the sensitivity of the cat's sense of smell, and we often forget that what we find pleasant may be unbearably overpowering to the cat. Rinsing the tray well after cleaning should help to minimise these problems.

Another factor that may need to be changed is the type of litter tray. Even if a cat has always used a covered litter tray it may be important to consider the effect of this cover. If a cat has become overweight, it may no longer fit comfortably in a covered tray. An elderly cat that may have problems such as arthritis may also find climbing into an uncovered tray, or a litter tray with lower sides, much easier. Lastly, covered trays may hold in odours that are associated with infrequent cleaning.

The location of the litter tray can often be important for cats with an inappropriate elimination problem. Some cats may be unwilling to use a tray that is difficult or inconvenient to access, and others will refuse to use the facilities if they are located in an area that the cat finds unappealing or unpleasant. For example, a litter tray that is near a washing machine may be undesirable. Older cats can find stairs an obstacle and can be unwilling to go into the utility room for example to use the litter tray.

When there are multiple cats in the home, multiple trays in multiple locations may be needed. It is suggested that some cats may be unwilling to go to certain locations to use the litter tray, if those areas are associated with another cat. Most cats prefer privacy when they eliminate. If the litter tray is located in a busy or noisy area in the home, the cat may avoid it. Moving the tray to another quieter location may encourage the cat to return to litter tray use.
How can I stop the cat from eliminating in the home?

A cat may not use the litter tray if it prefers another location. This can often be determined by a careful history into where the elimination is found. If it is always found in one place, this may indicate a location preference, while elimination on one particular surface type or texture (such as carpeting or tiled floors), indicates a substrate preference. If it is happening in only one or two places, the cat should be prevented from being in that location without supervision. When no one is home, or when the owners are asleep, the cat may need to be confined. When you are at home, you should always know where the cat is. This can be accomplished by watching the cat or by using a bell on an approved cat collar or a lead and harness. It is important to eliminate all odours that might be attracting the cat back to the area. This can be done by using a solution of biological washing powder followed by surgical spirit or a commercial odour neutraliser. Changing the function of the area by turning it into a feeding, playing or sleeping area may reduce the cat’s desire to eliminate there. In some cases, access to the area can be permanently prevented by closing off doors to the area, by putting up barricades, or confining the cat away from the problem area.

How can we make the litter area more appealing?

Besides making the location where the cat has eliminated inaccessible and undesirable, the litter tray needs to be made attractive to the cat. More frequent cleaning, or switching litter materials may be all that is needed. If the problem relates to disruptions in the chosen litter tray area, moving the tray to a quieter, more secure location may help to encourage the cat to return to using the tray.

Cats that prefer to eliminate on only one type of "substrate" such as a wood floor, or carpet, should be offered a variety of litter choices. Some cats may prefer a clumping litter, wood shavings, or recycled newspaper. For cats that prefer solid or hard surfaces, an empty litter tray, or one with minimal litter might be helpful. A carpeted ledge around the tray or some discarded or shredded carpet in the tray might help to increase the appeal for cats that prefer to eliminate on carpets, while some potting soil or a mixture of sand and soil, may be preferable for cats that eliminate in plants or soil. Making a good choice may require a little imagination and should be based on the type of surfaces in the home on which the cat is eliminating.

In most cases the cat will self-train itself, but sometimes they need encouragement in the form of rewards for using the tray. The cat can be encouraged to follow a food treat which is given to it once it enters the tray. This will help counteract any aversions to the tray, which may have become established. Also the cat should be rewarded whenever it is seen to use the tray.

I've made the litter more appealing and the house-soiling areas less appealing but the cat continues to eliminate in inappropriate areas. What next?

Even after making the litter area more appealing, decreasing the appeal of the soiled areas, and dealing with any underlying fear or anxiety problem through the use of specific anti-anxiety medication, the problem may persist. Confinement to an area with bedding, water and a litter tray (away from the areas that have been soiled) may be necessary to re-establish litter tray use. Generally a small room such as a utility room or bedroom where the cat has not previously soiled should be used. Also be sure to confine your pet in an area where the litter tray and litter area are appealing, there are no obvious deterrents, and the available surfaces other than the tray are unlikely to appeal to the cat as somewhere to soil. In rare cases where the cat will not use its litter tray at all, confinement in a cat cage or a large dog cage with a floor tray covered in litter and a shelf for perching and sleeping may be needed to get the litter use restarted. Most cats will require confinement to this area for one to four weeks, (the longer the problem the longer the confinement period). Confinement however, may not be required all of the time. For example, if the cat only eliminates out of its tray at night, or when the owners are preparing for work, then these are the only times that the cat may need to be confined. Many cats, when supervised will not eliminate in the inappropriate areas so that these cats can be allowed out of confinement when the owner is available to supervise. It may also be possible to allow cats out of confinement with minimal supervision for the first few hours after the cat has eliminated in its litter tray. Allowing release from confinement and some food treats immediately following elimination may also help reinforce
use of the litter tray. Over time, cats that have been confined are gradually given more freedom and less supervision.

Are drugs useful in treating inappropriate elimination?

If an inappropriate elimination problem is simply due to a surface substrate preference, location preference or any type of aversion, drug therapy is very unlikely to be helpful. However where the deposition of urine and or faeces outside the litter tray is a symptom of an underlying fear or anxiety condition, or indeed a medical condition drug therapy may need to be considered. An accurate diagnosis is needed to determine if such therapy will be helpful and which drug to choose. Whilst many drugs may help control the problem initially, there is often a return to the problem when they are withdrawn and this may happen even though the psychological factors which led to the problem have been eliminated.

I am finding the urine on vertical surfaces like walls and backs of furniture. What does that mean?

When cats deposit small squirts of urine on vertical surfaces, it is known as spraying. This is a scent marking behavior rather than elimination. Usually the cat backs up to a vertical surface, raises its tail, treads with its back feet, the tail may quiver and a stream of urine is directed backwards. Marking includes spraying urine on vertical locations as well as depositing small amounts of urine in horizontal surfaces. Occasionally faeces may be used to mark an area. A cat may mark due to the presence of other cats both inside and outside of the home. Spraying is a normal sexual behavior in both males and females but when it occurs indoors it may also be a manifestation of stress.

My cat is defecating outside of the litter tray, what should I do?

Much of the information described for urination problems is needed when considering defecation problems. If medical problems are ruled out, similar diagnostic and treatment considerations are usually considered.

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