

INDOOR TOILETING PROBLEMS IN CATS

Marking or toileting?

Indoor marking behaviour can be confused with a breakdown in toileting behaviour. Territorial marking by urine spraying which usually occurs against vertical objects such as chairs or walls and can be distinguished from urinating where a greater volume of liquid is deposited from a squatting position by both male and female cats. However, sometimes a small volume of concentrated urine is also deposited from a squatting position as a mark, and faeces can also be used to mark territory in a behaviour known as middening.

Why do cats toilet indoors?

One of the reasons cats make good pets is that they usually learn very early and with little effort from us that our homes are not toilets. Kittens almost instinctively head for the litter tray at even a few weeks of age and usually make the transfer fully to the garden once allowed out. Some individuals take longer to learn than others and some longhair breeds can be notoriously difficult to establish as house trained. Yet others develop clean indoor behaviour normally and then suffer a breakdown, perhaps as a result of illness and then fail to re-establish their previous clean behaviour.

Treatment

Several aspects of the cat's environment can be altered to try and treat the problem.

The litter tray

(a) Number of litter trays

One tray per cat is a good rough guide, as many cats do not like to share trays.

(b) Type of litter

Several types of cat litter can be offered, such as Fuller's Earth granule types, wood chip pellet, re-usable waxed granule varieties or finer grained litters. Cats often prefer finely grained substrates such as sand or a proprietary brand with sand-like texture. If the cat is to be allowed outdoors the litter can be mixed with soil from the garden to help transfer toileting behaviour completely to the outdoors later (ensure vaccinations are up to date).

(c) Cleaning

The litter tray should neither be allowed to get too dirty as this will discourage most cats, nor should it be cleaned too often as the presence of the cat's own smell on the litter will help to develop the idea of a latrine. Solids can be removed regularly but the more cats use a tray, the more often it will need to be cleaned, but one per day per cats is recommended.

(d) Security and position

An open litter tray in a busy part of the room may make some cats feel very vulnerable and they may prefer to eliminate (urine or faeces) behind the furniture or in a quite corner. Place the tray in a secure quiet place and either cover with an inverted cardboard box with a hole cut in it for entry and exit or buy a proprietary litter covered litter box. For those that seem anxious, although many prefer an open tray. Cats may usually be most unwilling to use a litter tray placed too close to a feeding area.

Encouraging use/preventing accidents

Confine the cat in a kittening pen in a small room with only enough space for a bed and a litter tray. The desire to avoid soiling the bed is established early in life and he or she should move as far away from the bed as possible to eliminate and this will mean using the litter tray. Hopefully within a few days the cat should again begin to associate toileting with the litter tray. The cat should be kept in the cage indoors at all times when the owner is unable to supervise. After a couple of days of 'good aim' the cat can be allowed out of the cage only into the room where it is kept and the litter tray moved progressively further away from the bed. Access to the rest of the house should be allowed one room at a time and only under supervision for the initial introduction to each room.

Cleaning up

Before allowing access to any room, all previous unwanted toileting areas should be thoroughly cleaned using a proprietary 'urine digester' or a warm solution of a biological washing powder or liquid followed by a light scrubbing with an alcohol such as surgical spirit. (Do check that cleaning does not remove colour from carpet etc) The area should be left to dry thoroughly before supervised access is allowed.

Other ways of increasing your chance of success.

1. Board up the cat flap where appropriate to help redefine the indoors from the outdoors and the safety of the home. This will also help manage the cat's access to the indoors and aid supervision when there. It may help to put the cat out immediately after feeding as toileting sometimes follows. The cat should generally be encouraged to spend more time outdoors as the more he is out the greater the chance of needing to go to the toilet in a suitable place and its development as a latrine.

2. Never punish cats. If caught in the act they can be picked up and placed on the litter tray, stroked and calmed. Never 'rub the cat's nose in it' as this will make a nervous cat even more likely to toilet indoors.

3. The speed and success of treatment may be assisted by the use of certain drugs, particularly with nervous or agoraphobic cats. This option should be discussed with your Vet and only used in conjunction with the above suggestions.