

Feline Elimination Problems: Oh Where, Oh Where Has My Little Cat Gone?

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A significant number of cats who don't use their litter boxes fail to respond to treatment because owners (and others) don't pay attention to all the things these animals can communicate via this behavior. Unfortunately many owners are like Sherry B., who finds the idea that her cat, Melrose, pees outside of the box so disgusting, she doesn't want to think about it at all.

However, we can't properly treat a cat who doesn't use the litter box until we know why he is displaying these behaviors in the first place. And we can't obtain this knowledge, until we first understand the where, who, what, and when of inappropriate elimination.

Cats who don't relieve themselves in their litter boxes may relieve themselves in a variety of different places. For example, Melrose periodically pees on the bathroom rug whereas other cats always pee there or in the sink or tub. Another group of cats either consistently or intermittently eliminates right beside the box. A third group routinely relieves themselves in the corner of closets, spare rooms, or in potted plants. Yet another batch urinates or defecates at the top or bottom of stairs, just inside the front door, or in the baby's crib or on the owner's bed as well as in their litter boxes.



"So what?" asks Sherry. "What difference does it make where the cat goes?"

In fact, where a cat chooses to go can tell us a great deal about the nature of the problem. To see how this works, let's examine each these examples more closely.

Although Sherry considers Melrose's peeing on the bathroom rug a random, spiteful occurrence designed to irritate and embarrass her, in reality he only displays this behavior during the spring and fall breeding seasons. Far from wanting to punish or embarrass her, he seeks only to announce his willingness to protect his (and her) home from all those free-roaming cats outdoors.

"But he's neutered!" Sherry exclaims. "Why should he care what those other cats are doing?"

The cat's solitary nature makes him want to protect his territory, something even a neutered cat who's never seen another cat and has no desire to mate with one will instinctively want to do. What makes this behavior different from the territorial marking described below, is its seasonal nature.

Cats who routinely eliminate in the owner's bathroom probably do so for one of two reasons. Recall our previous discussion of the cat's maternal nature. Cats who possess strong ties with their owners may take a "Where you go, I go approach." In this situation, putting the box in the bathroom usually solves the problem. Other times cats forced to use infrequently cleaned litter boxes may opt for the owner's bathroom. Granted their owners may carry on while cleaning the sink, tub, or rug, but the fact remains that they *will* clean it, and undoubtedly much more quickly and often than they clean the litter box. Needless to say, cleaning these animals' boxes more often can resolve the problem.

What about cats who consistently relieve themselves right by the box? This pattern communicates that the cat knows where he's supposed to go, but something about the set-up disturbs him. Sometimes the litter causes the problem. For



every new litter that comes on the market, we can probably find a cat allergic to it. Some cats itch, others sneeze, still others get runny eyes or sore feet. If the irritation bothers the cat enough, he will avoid the box. Using shredded white paper towels then gradually shifting to a plain, dust-free clay litter with no additives may solve the problem. Other cats experience similar aversions to covered litter boxes and simply removing the hood will cure the inappropriate elimination.

Cats who intermittently deposit urine and/or stool right beside or even draped over the edge of the box communicate yet another message. Because cats depend so much on glands in their feet to lay down scent trails in the wild, they take keeping their feet clean very seriously. Consequently, many cats will place their feet only on clean litter.

Observe your cat the next time you clean his litter box. Most cats dive dead center into the box, then work their way toward the edges over time. If the owner doesn't clean the box often enough, eventually the cat will reach a point where his feet are on clean litter, but his rear end hangs over the edge of the box, as does any waste the animal eliminates. Changing the box more often and moving it away from the wall so the cat can work it from all four sides will eliminate this problem.

Cats who routinely urinate *and* defecate away from the box are telling us that something about the location of the box upsets them. Shy cats expected to use boxes in laundry rooms frequented by rambunctious toddlers, old cats whose boxes lie at the bottom of steep cellar stairs, or shy cats in multiple cat households all may opt to relieve themselves in more hospitable surroundings. A distinguishing characteristic of this group is that they'll often try to find an acceptable litter as well as location. This may lead them to relieve themselves in plants or piles of papers that they can use to cover their wastes. Simply putting a litter box in these areas (after *thoroughly* cleaning the previously used space) can relieve this tension.

Cats who urinate *or* defecate outside their litter boxes as well as urinate *and* defecate in it also display territorial marking behavior. However, unlike Melrose who only pees on the bathroom rug during the breeding season, these cats do it year around.

For sure, territorial marking always communicates that the cat feels vulnerable in his surroundings. Because of this, we can appreciate why cats in this position day and day out become prime candidates for urinary tract and other medical problems. Conversely, cats with physical problems may feel sufficiently vulnerable that they begin marking their territories in hopes the scent message conveyed in the urine or stool will scare off any real or imagined threats. While this system works beautifully in the wild, the many different stresses cats encounter in a complex human environments may overwhelm them.

If you have a pet behavior question or would like some training assistance,
San Diego Humane Society is here to help!
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or call our **Behavior Helpline at 619-299-7012 ext. 2244** to speak with a trainer.