



# HELP! My cat is house soiling!



House soiling is one of the most common behavioral problems reported in cats and can signal medical, social or environmental issues.

Here is some advice to help you and your kitty live in tidy harmony.

## COMMON CAUSES

**Medical conditions.** Changes in litter box behavior should prompt a visit to your veterinarian. Your vet will test your cat for inflammation, infection or stones in the urinary tract, metabolic problems that cause dehydration or increased urine output, or gastrointestinal problems that lead to defecation outside the box. Treating the medical condition often resolves the house soiling.

**The search for a better toilet.** Cats use litter boxes from an innate drive to be clean. Many factors make a litter box undesirable. Dirty boxes or coarse scented litter types are repugnant; a small box may be uncomfortable; a location that is subject to ambush too risky; and a basement or attic location can be inconvenient for the cat to use. If the cat is not happy, then no one is happy!

**Cats have something to say.** Urine marking makes a social statement. Urine is deposited outside the litter box -- not from a need to pee, but a need to 'be heard' via scent. For better scenting and visibility, urine marks are usually found in prominent places, and on vertical surfaces (i.e. walls or on furniture, not floors), though some cats mark on horizontal surfaces as well. Conflict is the usual cause of urine marking, most often with other cats within the same household, or outdoor cats seen or heard from inside the home. Other causes can include social pressure around essential resources such as litter boxes and traveling routes. Frustration and lack of control or predictability in the environment can also contribute.

## WHAT SHOULD I NOT DO?

**Never punish your cat for soiling in the house.** Make sure that all your interactions build trust so you don't make things worse. If you catch your cat in the act, call your cat with a friendly voice or walk over and gently pick up your cat, and walk him/her kindly to

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the litter box. Being stern or corrective will not teach the cat that house soiling is wrong. It will make it harder for your cat to trust you or to eliminate in the litter box if you are nearby!



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### WHAT SHOULD I DO?

**1 Start a journal and record each incident.** The answer to 'why' may be revealed over time.

- Record the date and time; whether urine, stool or both; the volume; the location including whether a horizontal (like the floor) or vertical (like the wall) surface, and whether the box was also used that day. Record the consistency of any stool.
- If you saw your cat eliminate, describe the cat's posture, and if there were any attempts to dig or cover.
- Watch the interactions between household cats. Look for signs of passive conflict, such as one cat blocking another from entering a room or using the stairs.

**2 Make an appointment with your veterinarian** for a medical work up for your cat, including a complete physical exam, and any recommended tests (e.g. urinalysis, chemistry profile, thyroid test, x-ray or ultrasound). Certain anxiety reducing medications can be very effective in reducing urine marking, as long as factors that contribute to conflict between cats are also addressed. The feline pheromone product Feliway® MultiCat can facilitate conflict resolution and reduce urine marking.

**3 Review litter box hygiene and management** (See sidebar.)

- To try an alternate litter or style of litter box, offer it in addition to the current box.
- To try an alternate location for the litter box, place a new box in the new space, leaving the current box where it is. Allow 1-2 weeks to see which litter, type of box or location is preferred.
- Clean soiled areas by applying water and then using a towel to blot dry. Repeat several times, then apply an odor neutralizing product and allow to dry. Avoid using soaps or other chemicals because they will inactivate the odor neutralizer.

*Don't wait! Seek help early. For help with a cat who is house soiling, talk to your primary care veterinarian or FIND A VETERINARY BEHAVIORIST here.*

**Every cat is different. What matters is what YOUR cat likes.**

#### Most cats like:

- A wide open / uncovered box
- A box sized at least 1.5 x the length of the cat
- Fine grained, unscented, clumping litter
- Box scooped or picked 1-2 times daily
- Box location easy to reach, in an open, convenient area
- One litter box per cat plus one additional box in varied locations to avoid conflict between cats

#### Many cats DON'T like:

- A box in a cramped location or accessed through cat door
- A small box
- Coarse, crystal or pelleted litter
- Self-cleaning litter boxes
- Soiled litter