Inappropriate Elimination Disorders in Cats

The term "elimination disorder" is used to describe cats that do not use their litter boxes for urination and/or defaecation; instead, these cats eliminate somewhere in the house. Elimination disorders are the most common behavioural problem of cats. Because most owners take pride in their homes, house soiling by the cat can strain the owner-pet relationship to the breaking point. Unfortunately, in some cases, frustrated owners give up their cat to an animal shelter or elect for euthanasia.

Contributing Factors
In some cases, a medical problem can be related to inappropriate elimination. When this is the case, improvement can be expected if the medical cause can be successfully treated. In most cases, however, inappropriate housesoiling is primarily a behavioural problem.

The more cats there are in a household, the greater the chances that inappropriate elimination will occur. One study found that for every cat present there is a 10% chance. This means that if there are 6 cats in a household, there is a 60% chance of inappropriate elimination occurring.

Causes
As mentioned above, after medical causes of these problems have been ruled out, the source of the problem is considered a behavioural disorder. Behavioural causes of inappropriate elimination fall into two general categories: 1) a dislike of the litter box, and 2) stress-related misbehaviour.

One of the main reasons for the cat avoiding the litterbox is because the box has somehow become objectionable to the cat. This usually occurs because it is not cleaned frequently enough or because the cat objects to the type of litter used; this is called substrate aversion. Sometimes, the cat dislikes the location of the litterbox (avoidance of location). Substrate aversion is by far more common than avoidance of the box because of its location.

There are many possible related causes. Some of these can include the following:
1. A new person (especially a baby) in the house
2. A person that has recently left the house (permanently or temporarily)
3. Several new pieces of furniture or rearrangement of existing furniture
4. New drapes or carpet
5. Moving to a new house
6. A new pet in the house
7. A pet that has recently left the house
8. A new cat or dog in the neighbourhood
9. A cat in heat in the neighbourhood

Therapy
Most successful treatments rely on a combination of behaviour modification techniques and drug therapy.

A. Behaviour Modification
Behaviour therapy involves a dual approach involving (1) Aversion Therapy and (2) Attraction Therapy. The former repels the cat from the inappropriate location, and the latter encourages the cat to choose an appropriate location.

The purpose of Aversion Therapy is to make the area of inappropriate urination or defaecation undesirable for the cat.
There are many ways to do this, but the following steps have proven successful in a high percentage of cases.

1. A product to neutralise the odour of urine or stool should be used in places where inappropriate urination or defaecation has occurred. Several products are available for this purpose. When using one of these, try it on a hidden piece of carpet (in a closet, etc.) to be sure it does not stain your carpet. White vinegar spray may also be effective in masking the odour of urine. It is important that you clean the area thoroughly first, and do not use an ammonia based cleaner (as this has a similar odour to urine).

Although many of the available products do a good job, none of them will undo months or years or repeated soiling. The sooner the affected area is treated, the better. If the objectionable location is on carpet, it is necessary to treat the carpet and the pad below because most of the odour will be in the pad. This usually means soaking the carpet with the neutralising product so it penetrates into the pad.

2. If the soil in potted plants is being used, place a lemon-scented air freshener at the base of the plant. This usually involves one of three types of medications.

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4. Place food bowls next to the area, as cats will usually not like to toilet near their feeding place.

The purpose of Attraction Therapy is to make the litter box more desirable than the inappropriate site.

The following are usually successful:

1. Purchase a new, non-hooded litter box; even well cleaned litter boxes have odour deep in the plastic. Although we like our privacy, most cats find a hooded litter box undesirable presumably because it traps odours inside.

2. Put non-scented clumping litter in the new litter box. If your cat has not been using this type of litter, it will usually find it more desirable than the clay types. In generally, most cats seem to prefer these newer litters because they have a more "natural" feeling to the feet. Some behaviourists theorise that these new litters are more reminiscent to the cat's ancestral elimination substrate - desert sand. Generally, if your cat likes to dig in, and covers faeces with the litter, then it is a suitable litter for your cat.

3. Place the new litter box near the area of inappropriate urination until it is used for several days, and then move it one metre per day back to the desired location. Eventually, there will be two litter boxes side-by-side. When your cat clearly chooses one or the other, remove the extra one.

4. Keep the existing litter box in the normal location in case the aversion therapy causes your cat to return to it.

B. Medical Therapy
This usually involves one of three types of medications.

1. Anti-anxiety drugs such as clomicalm

2. Tranquilisers, including diazepam and phenobarbital

3. Hormones, including megestrol acetate and medroxyprogesterone acetate
C. Another Option
We have a product called Feliway®, which can be used in the area of appropriate elimination. The solution contains a synthetic derivative of feline hormones, called pheromones. It is thought to have a calming and comforting effect on some cats. It has not been completely studied by independent researchers but is thought to show some promise in decreasing, though not totally eliminating, inappropriate elimination in cats. It is available in a spray, or as a ‘plug-in’ aerosol.

Prognosis
The prognosis for improvement is more likely if several of the following are true:

1. The duration is less than 1 month when treatment begins.
2. There are only one or two locations in the house that the cat uses for inappropriate elimination.
3. It is possible to identify and relieve the stress-causing situation.
4. It is possible to neutralise the odour caused by the urine or stool.
5. You have only one cat.
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2. If the soil in potted plants is being used, place a lemon-scented air freshener at the base of the plant. This will usually repel the cat. In some cases, the plant may need to be removed.

3. Cover the area(s) with aluminium foil and secure it to the carpet or furniture with masking tape. Aluminium foil is a surface on which most cats will not walk.

4. Place food bowls next to the area, as cats will usually not like to toilet near their feeding place.

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