

Feline Spraying and Soiling Indoors:



The cat is usually fastidious about its toilet habits and will consistently use a litter tray indoors, if it is provided, or soil in the garden. Therefore if urine or faeces is discovered in the corner of the room it can be very worrying. Occasionally a one-off accident can occur if a cat is ill, trapped in a room or suddenly frightened. If inappropriate urination or defecation in the home persists it should be investigated for the health and welfare of the cat. Whatever the cause, punishment is not the answer. This will only make the cat fearful and the problem worse. Deterrents, such as tin foil, pepper, citrus peel or a water pistol will merely redirect the behaviour to another site, cause further anxiety and delay investigating the root cause for the behaviour. Despite the unpleasant nature of this problem it is important to remember – this is not a dirty protest! The cat is not seeking revenge or making a point; something has gone wrong in its world and a certain amount of detective work is required to find out what.

Spraying or urinating?

Cats use urine as a scent signal or 'mark' for themselves and other cats. The motivation for the deposition of urine for scent marking is very different to that of urination to relieve a full bladder. It is therefore important to establish whether the cat is spraying or urinating since the potential solutions will vary. To urinate the cat squats and deposits a volume of urine on a horizontal surface. The cat may then scratch at the area around the urine although this is not always the case. Common sites for inappropriate urination include carpet, settees, duvets, baths or sinks. To spray urine the cat stands up, usually making a treading motion with its back feet, quivers its tail and a small amount of urine is sprayed backwards onto a vertical surface such as a wall, leaving an obvious scent mark. Common sites for spraying include doors, windows, around cat flaps, curtains, electrical equipment and shopping or rubbish bags. Once it has been ascertained which of the two the cat is doing it is necessary to take action to resolve the behaviour.

Cleaning soiled areas

Whether a genuine accident or not, once the cat has urinated or defecated at a particular location its sensitive nose will encourage it to use that place as a regular toilet. The best way to break the habit is to keep the cat away from the area as long as possible, remove any smell that the cat can detect and change the geography of the location by using pieces of furniture to block access. Wash the area with a 10% solution of biological or enzymatic washing powder and then rinse with cold water and allow to dry. Spray the area (using a plant mister) with surgical spirit, scrub and leave to dry. You may want to try a small area first on delicate fabrics. Petfresh (Urine-off) Urine Stain and Odour Remover is a particularly effective product to remove residual odours; this can be purchased from your local veterinary surgery. Carpet is extremely absorbent and the urine often penetrates the full thickness of the carpet to the flooring underneath. If the area is badly soiled over a long period it may be necessary to cut out the section of carpet and underlay and treat the concrete or floorboards underneath before replacing.

Medical problems

A cat that has started to urinate inappropriately in the house should be taken to the vet for a check up. Cystitis may cause the cat to strain and pass small amounts of urine frequently. A form of urinary tract disease that is



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stress-related is less obvious in its presentation but one common symptom is urinating outside the litter tray. Any urinary tract infection or irritation can make the cat urinate when standing rather than attempting to go outside or to the litter tray. Urination in this way can sometimes be confused with spraying. Cats often benefit from increased fluid intake if they suffer from recurrent cystitis. This may require your cat to change from a dry diet to a wet one but your veterinary surgeon should be consulted regarding any dietary management.

In addition our qualified Veterinary Nurse Jo has a special interest in feline behaviour, please contact the surgery to make an appointment to chat to Jo about your problem pussy cat!



Why does my cat soil indoors?

There are numerous reasons why an individual cat would start to soil indoors. Listed below are the most common reasons together with possible solutions.

- **Illness:** Urinary tract disease or diarrhoea can cause soiling as the cat is either in discomfort or just couldn't make it to the litter tray or outside.

Possible solution : Treatment by a veterinary surgeon will usually return the cat's habits to a normal acceptable pattern. Occasionally cats will continue to soil if they have experienced discomfort on the tray so it may be necessary to provide an additional tray elsewhere to encourage use.

- **Old age:** An older cat may not want to venture out in bad weather or it may be having problems using the cat flap because of stiff joints. As a cat gets older it becomes more insecure and it may feel threatened by the presence of other cats in the territory.

Possible solution: It is almost inevitable that, at some stage, elderly cats will require safe and accessible toilet facilities indoors. The provision of an indoor litter tray often resolves this problem. It is always important to rule out medical causes for soiling in the elderly.

- **Fear or anxiety:** Cats are at their most vulnerable to attack when they are urinating or defecating outside and, if they feel threatened, it may deter them from doing so. Other cats are usually the biggest problem but it could be a neighbour's dog or even a sudden loud noise.

Possible solution: The provision of a discreet litter tray indoors will take away the feelings of anxiety and the need for the cat to make a conscious decision to find a suitable toilet site. Accompanying the cat on visits to the garden may encourage it to eliminate outside again. Your cat may normally have chosen to toilet well away from its home so it may be beneficial to make its own garden more appealing. Create an area of soil in a quiet corner relatively close to the house (for ease of escape back indoors) and mix in a high proportion of peat-free soil or sand.

- **Removal of previously used sites:** Some cats are creatures of habits in their choice of elimination sites and redesigning a garden can have a serious impact on their behaviour.

Possible solution: Always ensure that changes to the garden incorporate an area that can be comfortably used by your cat as a latrine (well dug over soil). If you are aware of your cat's favoured site then preserving it in some way would be ideal.

- **Presence of strangers:** Occasionally a cat will urinate or defecate indoors if strangers are in the home and access to the litter tray or outdoors would require the cat to pass through the same room as the visitor. Some cats suffer from 'home alone' anxieties when their owners go away and leave them to defend the house by themselves. The presence of a stranger caring for them can cause some cats to feel intensely threatened and subsequently 'mark' an area, particularly the owner's bed, which has a strong, familiar and reassuring scent.

Possible solution: If your cat is particularly nervous of strangers, especially young children, it may be beneficial to provide an indoor litter facility in the room where the cat seeks refuge just in case he gets 'caught short'! The best way to avoid 'home alone' soiling is to keep the bedroom door shut and try to get familiar people to care for your cat in your absence. Some cats are particularly prone to the stress of being left behind and they actually benefit from a visit to a reputable and caring FAB Listed Boarding Cattery.



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Litter tray problems:

If your cat normally uses a litter tray but has recently started to go elsewhere in the house there may be an obvious reason.

Here are the most common causes:

- **Dirty litter trays:** Cats don't like using a tray if it is heavily soiled. Litter trays should be cleaned out completely every couple of days and topped up with fresh litter daily once the solids and clumps are removed. If the litter is a non-clumping variety it should be changed every couple of days (solids removed daily) since the build-up of odour from the urine passed can become extremely unpleasant for the cat.
- **Put off by litter:** Using scented litter, deodorants or disinfectants with strong smells may put the scent-sensitive cat off using the tray. Use a mild detergent and hot water or disinfectant specifically recommended for tray cleaning and rinse the tray thoroughly before use. Avoid disinfectants that turn cloudy in water as these usually contain phenols which are toxic to cats. Cats learning to use the tray initially may need to establish it as an appropriate toilet site and too frequent cleaning may weaken the association. Polythene litter liners can occasionally catch in the cat's claws as it scratches and cause litter to spray upwards so, if they are used, it may be worth experimenting with no liner to see if the problem resolves.
- **Wrong type of litter:** Changing the consistency or type of litter may put the cat off using it. Hard wood based pellets may have been acceptable as a kitten but as cats get heavier there are some that object to walking on the uncomfortable surface. Cats prefer fine grain litter with the consistency of sand with no scented deodoriser. If you want to change the type you use, mix the new one in gradually over a week to gauge the cat's reaction.
- **Position of the litter tray:** If the tray is positioned in the open where the dog, children or other cats disturb it, the cat may feel too vulnerable to use it. Instead it may seek a more secure spot behind the television. Cats may not like to use a tray if it is next to a noisy washing machine or tumble dryer. Place the tray in a quiet corner where the cat only has to watch in one or two directions at once rather than in the open or in a thoroughfare. Placing food near the tray will put the cat off using it so place feeding bowls elsewhere.
- **Type of litter tray:** Some cats prefer the security of a covered tray whilst others prefer an open tray as it offers more options for escape. If you normally use an open tray it may be worth purchasing one with a lid or vice versa. An inverted box with one side cut out or careful positioning of house plants may provide the necessary privacy. Some covered trays have flaps over the entrance and these can be one obstacle too many for the more insecure cat.
- **Bad associations:** Occasionally a cat decides not to use a tray because it has had a bad experience there. Giving medication or touching a cat whilst it is using the tray may be sufficient to create a bad association. Repositioning the tray to a quiet spot may help.
- **Early training:** Kittens will often soil in the house when they are young if they are given immediate access to large areas. When kittens first arrive in their new home they are only weeks away from their original litter training by their mother. Their bladder and bowel control are not as developed as an adult so it is important that the young kitten has easy access to the litter tray at all times. It is advisable to confine the kitten to one room initially with increasing periods of time to explore other areas after a few weeks. Every time the kitten uses the tray it is establishing an entrenched behaviour that will be maintained throughout its life.

Why does my cat spray indoors?

All cats, male or female, entire or neutered can spray. Usually this occurs outdoors as a part of the scent communication system. They also leave scent signals by rubbing, scratching and bunting (rubbing the glands around the mouth onto twigs or other objects). The cat leaves a scent not just to let other cats know it is there but to 'furnish' its area with its own familiar smell, for confidence. In the un-neutered cat, the urine not only signals the cat's presence but its status. Females in season have high levels of oestrogen in their urine to attract toms and they leave a highly pungent spray which is a combination of urine and secretions from anal glands under the tail. Most pet cats are neutered and do not spray indoors, probably because they do not feel they need to. Spraying indoors is a sign that the cat is feeling stressed and needs to make itself feel more secure, surrounding itself by its own scent. As indoor spraying indicates that the cat feels threatened by something, any use of punishment by the owner only serves to make problems worse. Owners must instead try to ascertain what the threat is and then take action to alleviate it. The most common cause is the presence of other cats, either within the house or in the neighbourhood. However a new baby or person in the household, building work, redecoration or a change of routine can herald the start of indoor spraying if the cat is already slightly anxious.



- **New resident cat**

The addition of a new cat to the household can threaten resident cats, or upset the balance in an existing multi-cat household and induce spraying. An established member of the household may reach social maturity (between the ages of 18 months and four years) and begin challenging for status in the group. Urine spraying under either of these circumstances is almost always accompanied by a degree of passive or active aggression and intimidating behaviour that the owner may not be aware of. To overcome this difficult problem it is necessary to prevent conflict and create positive associations with the home and a renewed sense of security and confidence.

Providing an abundant supply of resources will potentially decrease the need for competition. The favoured number would be one resource per cat plus one in different locations, including:

Feeding stations (ad lib feeding will promote a less competitive attitude to food), Water sites, Warm beds, Litter trays, Scratching posts, High resting places and perches, Private hiding areas, Toys.

- **Threats from neighbouring cats**

Cats often spray around a cat flap or doors to make themselves secure and to signal their presence to invading cats. If your cat has been unsettled by another cat entering the house, block up the cat flap by placing a large board over the outer and inner surface of the door and let the cat in and out yourself. It is rarely sufficient to just shut the cat flap; cats often need the signal that the door is no longer penetrable. Fitting a cat flap that has a select entry magnetic or electronic system (using a device attached to your cat's collar) may prevent further invasions if blocking the flap permanently is not an option. Chase other cats out of the garden to give your cat support outside. Once the cat feels that indoors is safe there will be less need to mark it.

- **Decorating and building work**

A nervous cat or one that is kept entirely indoors may be threatened by changes to its environment. Smells brought in on feet may be enough to trigger a feeling of insecurity and a need to spray. Redecorating or replacing furniture effectively removes all the cat's subtle markings which have been carefully placed by rubbing and scratching, with the strong odour of new carpets, paint or furniture. To reduce their impact, keep the cat away from the rooms until the smells are not quite so strong and have mingled with the familiar scents around the house. You can help speed up this process by spreading some of the cat's scent yourself. Take a soft cotton cloth and rub it gently around the cat's face (where scent glands are present which produce the cat's individual scent). The secretion collected contains pheromones that provide a message of familiarity and security directly to the cat's brain. Rub the cloth against furniture or walls at cat height where the problem is occurring and repeat this several times a day. The cat may be less likely to spray if it is aware that its own scent is there already. Your veterinary surgeon can also supply a product which contains synthetic pheromones (Feliway, Ceva Animal Health) which act in the same way. If you are changing your sofa, for example, it often helps to plan ahead and use a fabric throw for a few weeks beforehand which can be draped over the new piece of furniture to make it smell more familiar and acceptable.

- **Help your cat feel secure**

Even when the cause of spraying is not obvious there are ways in which you can make your cat feel more secure. For example, limiting the area the cat has to patrol to one or two rooms may help improve feelings of security and reduce the desire to mark. Synthetic feline facial pheromones (Feliway) mimic the scent produced from glands on the cat's face. A diffuser version is available that can be plugged into a floor level socket in the room where the cat has been spraying most actively. Sprayed sites can be tackled directly by wiping away the deposited urine with hot water and kitchen paper. The site is then sprayed lightly with a fine mist (using a plant atomiser) of surgical spirit which is allowed to evaporate. The synthetic pheromone spray (Feliway) is then applied sparingly twice a day for at least a week. Placing small bowls of food at the sprayed sites may also aid in creating a more positive association with the area. When a cat is simply too stressed for the situation ever to be resolved it is worth considering re-homing the threatened cat (or the aggressor) to a place with no other cats. Without the pressure of having to cope with other cats the threatened cat is unlikely to spray and this way you can guarantee your cat will be happier. Even an aggressive cat is often stressed in a multi-cat environment and may benefit from a home as a singleton.

Specialist help



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Spraying and soiling can be cured in many cats using the techniques outlined here. In some cases the problem can be more persistent and it is advisable to discuss it with your veterinary surgeon rather than leave it to resolve on its own. Occasionally behaviour problems can be treated with medication but drugs are always best used in combination with behaviour therapy to alleviate the fundamental cause. If this is the case your vet will refer you to a specialist in feline behaviour.



The information in this help sheet was provided by FAB the feline adviser bureau.

For advice regarding feline spraying and soiling or to make an appointment to see the Nurse to discuss a behavioural problem, please contact the surgery.