

Defining the Litter Box Problem

Many times people see inappropriate elimination as one problem, when in fact it's potentially several problems, some of which may be related - or not. The most basic behaviors are those intended to mark territory and those that express dissatisfaction or discomfort with using a litter box. You must first observe, exactly, what your cat is doing - marking territory or avoiding the box - before you can figure out what to do about it.

Start a journal of your cat's errant deposits. A simple steno notebook works well. In it, write down the date and time, what you found (urine or feces), where you found it (on a horizontal surface or, in the case of urine, on a vertical one, such as the side of a couch), and the location in the house of the mess (in the bathtub, on a throw rug, next to the litter box). Note taking not only helps you figure out what kind of behavior the problem is and how you should approach it, but also helps you spot even small signs of progress. And perhaps most importantly, having a written record provides you with the information your veterinarian needs to help diagnose any medical problems.

What's Being Done, and Where?

With many animals, urine and feces are almost as much about marking territory as they are about eliminating waste products from the body. A dog who lifts his leg on every piece of furniture and wall corner in the house, for example, is marking a far different statement than the one who hikes his left once and lets flow all the urine stored in his bladder. The first is marking territory, the second doesn't understand where he's allowed to relieve himself, or has been cut off from that spot, or both.

The same scenario can be true with cats, especially male ones. Sometimes a cat's relieving himself, and sometimes he's sending a message. The difference is often one of location and context. Where is the mess? And what's going on in the cat's environment?

Recognizing "I gotta go" Behavior

A cat who's not relieving himself where he should deposits urine on a horizontal surface. If you see him releasing urine, you'll notice that he squats. Squatting is a very different behavior from the one used to mark territory.

If you have a cat who's leaving urine on a flat surface - even an elevated one such as the bottom of the sink - you have a cat who is relieving himself in an inappropriate way, as opposed to a cat who's marking territory.

Distinguishing "I'm sending a message" Behavior

The cat who's marking territory - spraying is the term behaviorists use - takes an entirely different approach to the release of urine. He sniffs the object of his interest and then turns and backs up to it. With his tail held high and quivering, he releases a small spray or urine straight back onto the surface. Sometimes he shifts his weight from one back leg to another as he sprays.

All cats have the potential to become sprayers, male and female both. That being said, the worse offenders, hands down, are unneutered males.

Okay, But What About Feces?

It's not too hard to figure out what's going on with urine - wet spots on flat surfaces and squatting are the signs of a cat relieving himself, while wet spots on vertical surfaces from a standing position are the signs of a cat marking territory. But what about those little gift piles? What do they mean?

Although some cats use uncovered feces to mark territory - the word for the behavior is maddening - it's more likely that gift piles are signs of a cat who is avoiding the litter box.

Which Cat is the Culprit?

Because many people share their lives with more than one cat, when they're faced with a wet spot or a gift pile, the question immediately arises: "Okay, which one of you did this?" Unfortunately, it's not so easy to tell.

Some behaviorists suggest that isolating each cat, one after the other, in a safe room. But that approach may not work if a territory dispute is at the heart of the problem. The culprit cat may react positively to the separation and quit his inappropriate behavior, but when you put the cats back together, the problem reappears. And you still don't know which cat is responsible.

One solution veterinarians use to help identify a problem cat in a multicat household is to give a fluorescent dye to one cat at a time. The dye will pass in the urine and can be detected through what's called a Wood's Lamp. To figure out which cat is leaving gift piles, ordinary food coloring will do. Place a few drops of green or blue in the cat's mouth before he eats. The stool of the marked cat should come out darker than the others.