

Last month I wrote about the all too common problem of cats not being able to urinate due to an obstruction of their urethra. This month I'll stay on the theme of feline elimination problems and talk about cats that can urinate just fine, but they do it inappropriately around the house. These cats won't use their litter pan.

I often find myself thinking, "What gives with these cats?" They can live with us in perfect co-existence for years then for no apparent reason they feel its time to begin exploring alternatives to the conventional litter pan. It may be the kid's bed, the couch, a favorite throw rug, or the kitchen counter! I even had one cat brought to me because he urinated in the surge protector that had the entire home entertainment system plugged into it. Fortunately no one was hurt and none of the equipment was damaged. Needless to say this is really a serious matter because if not solved it can result in the family needing to give up the cat, or worse, euthanasia.

Cats can lose their litter pan training for a number of reasons. Veterinarians that specialize in behavior problems describe four general causes for inappropriate elimination in cats. Lets review them, and how we might approach solving them.

1) Illness

Cats that are sick will sometimes change their bathroom habits. Certain illnesses can cause a change in the volume or character urine, necessitating a change in routine with respect to the litter pan. Diabetes, urinary tract infections, gastrointestinal and orthopedic problems are just a few examples of problems that result in changes in elimination behavior. This is why veterinarians will usually recommend some blood and urine tests during the initial evaluation. Often once the underlying medical problem is diagnosed and treated, the elimination problem resolves quickly.

2) Litter Pan aversion.

Cats can become aversive to certain litter pan materials, types or locations. Consider the cat that is presented with a new type of litter material because the pet owner prefers the smell of this one to the old one. Though pleasing to the human nose this new material may or may not be pleasant to the cats sense of smell causing him to look elsewhere to do his business. Or maybe the cat just prefers the litter pan to be cleaned more often (I know this is an issue at our house). These are times we need to think like a cat and not like a person. Cats can also become aversive to the general location of the litter pan due to some past startling experience like a slamming door or other loud noise. These experiences may make the cat hesitant to approach that area for fear of the noise occurring again. Aversion problems can be difficult. Sometimes selecting a temporary new location for the litter pan-hopefully still somewhat close to the original site-until the cat feels comfortable again, then slowly over a few days to weeks moving the pan back to its original location.

3) Material Preference

Some cats seem to develop a certain preference to eliminate on a material such as a specific blanket or rug. This one's harder for me to figure out but behavioral specialists report that it is seen from time to time. In these cases, some advocate

lining the bottom of the litter pan with the preferred material and slowly, over days to weeks, add increasing amounts of the desired litter material to the litter pan until the cat has become more comfortable with the litter material.

4) Stress

This is a big one. Cats do like their routine and anyone who tries to change things may have to suffer the consequences. Stress for a cat can come in many forms. Social stress is present when a cat feels its social rank in the home is threatened. While adding a new cat to the household mix is a common cause of stress it doesn't have to come from another cat. A new family member, houseguest, or even the occasional repairman can threaten a cat's sense of security and result in inappropriate elimination. Changes in routines can also be stressful for cats. That new work schedule that gets you home an hour later may not seem like a big deal to you but it's huge to some cats. Needless to say the challenge in solving a stress related problem is more in recognizing the cause of the stress than prescribing a treatment. Once we know what's bothering the cat, we can take steps to lessen the stress and hopefully return the litter pan routine to normal.

For those of you that have never had a cat eliminate inappropriately, again you are a very lucky cat owner. My advice for you is to never change anything. For the rest of you, realize that you're not alone and that the first step in overcoming this problem is a good thorough medical evaluation. If everything checks out with the exam and tests, you'll need to look closely at your daily routines and habits to uncover and eventually solve this challenging problem.

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