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Feline Urinary Problems

A cat that urinates in the house is a cat that not many people will tolerate. Unfortunately urinary problems are a common occurrence, so the following information is provided to help you deal with a cat that is urinating outside of the litter box.

Approximately 60% of cats that urinate outside of their litter box will do so because of a medical condition. Many diseases can cause urinary accidents, including bladder infections, bladder stones, FUS or feline urinary syndrome (a disease where the urine is no longer acidic, usually because of the cat's diet), kidney disease, diabetes, thyroid disease, arthritis or obesity. Your veterinarian will want to examine your cat and may need to do bloodwork, x-rays and a urinalysis to tell if there is an underlying medical condition causing inappropriate urination. Unfortunately, if a cat starts urinating outside of the litter box, even due to a medical condition, the urine problem may still persist. Your cat will associate the litter box with pain and discomfort. After a medical condition is treated, your cat may need to be retrained to the litter box. The rule of thumb is that the time spent not using the box equals the time needed to retrain the cat to use the box again.

Keep in mind that a male cat may become blocked and may not be able to urinate at all. He will strain to urinate, but nothing will come out. If you ever see this happen, it is a life-threatening emergency and your cat needs immediate veterinary care.

Cats can also spray urine or "mark their territory." As apposed to squatting to urinate, cats will raise their tail straight up, the tail will quiver, and urine will spray straight out. This is more common with unneutered male cats, or territorial cats that see other cats in their vicinity.

Cats do not urinate out of their litter box because they are mad at you! They like clean and comfortable litter boxes, and may get an aversion to the litter box if a medical condition causes painful urination. Then they will pick another space such as the tub, the sink, a bathmat, the bed, a laundry basket or open suitcase to urinate in. These other spaces are close enough in appearance to act as a litter box.

Approximately 40% of cats that urinate outside of their litter box will do so because of a behavioral condition. About half of the cats with a behavioral condition can be treated with the following protocol:

1. Keep the litter box clean and scoop it out twice a day.
2. Clean the box completely once a week using plain detergent (do not use strong smelling bleached or perfumed cleaners). Dispose of the used litter and refill with fresh litter.
3. Have at least one litter box per cat, plus one additional.
4. Use low-dust, unscented clumping litter.
5. Use a litter box that is big enough for the cat to move around in.
6. Position the litter box where the cat can reach it easily, especially if your cat is overweight, arthritic or elderly.

Stress may encourage a cat to urinate outside of the litter box. A new baby in the house, an owner away on business or multiple pets may be enough to stress a cat. The chance of urinary problems also increases rapidly with the number of cats in a household.

Try to remember that punishment is generally ineffective with cats. Usually punishment just makes the cat scared of you! Clean the soiled urine area thoroughly with an enzymatic cleaner, and confine the cat with the litter box in a confined space (like a bathroom or laundry room) until the cat uses the litter box again.

Some natural products are available that encourage a cat to use the litter box. Cat Attract is a litter box additive that attracts a cat to the box. Feliway (available in a spray or a room diffuser) is a natural cat pheromone that makes the cat more relaxed and more likely to use the box.

Medical treatment is a last ditch effort to treat a cat with a behavioral litter box problem. Anti-anxiety drugs or tranquilizers can help a stressed cat relax and more likely to use the box. As a rule, cats are very sensitive to drugs, so cats are not good candidates for long-term drug therapy.