



Cat Behaviour Guide

Unacceptable Indoor Elimination



Is your cat eliminating (urinating and/or defecating) outside of the litterbox? There can be several reasons for this behaviour, including location, environmental or social factors, and medical conditions. Here are some recommendations to help address unacceptable indoor elimination in cats!

Unacceptable Elimination

Urination outside of the litterbox is typically the first indication of unacceptable elimination (or house-soiling), as cats urinate more frequently. It is also important to distinguish marking from unacceptable elimination.

We refer to elimination outside of the litterbox as “unacceptable” instead of “inappropriate” because elimination is a normal behaviour for cats. It is up to us, as pet guardians, to provide accessible, clean, and safe elimination sites for our cat.

Urination or Marking?

Marking (or urine spraying) is when cats urinate on vertical surfaces outside of the litterbox for the purpose of communicating with other cats.

Whereas unacceptable elimination is when cats urinate or defecate on vertical or horizontal surfaces outside of the litterbox, which can have different causes. If you are unsure which behavioural issue your cat is displaying, then consult with your veterinarian.

Litterbox Considerations

When troubleshooting your cat’s elimination issues, consider the following factors:

- Place the litterbox in a quiet, relatively undisturbed area in your home. Ensure the location is accessible for your cat. For example, senior cats with mobility issues may not be able to access an area by stairs, such as a basement or an upper level. Some cats are fearful of the noise produced by self-cleaning litterboxes.
- The litterbox should be located away from your cat’s food and water dishes, and preferred resting areas.
- Frequently clean the litterbox to prevent urine and fecal accumulation. Ideally, you should scoop your cat’s litterbox once per day and the entire box should be emptied and cleaned each week.
- A litterbox that is too small for your cat can prevent litterbox use. Your cat’s litterbox should be one and a half times longer than your cat, from nose to tail.



Cat Behaviour Guide

Unacceptable Indoor Elimination



- Litterbox design. Some cats find covered litterboxes aversive, as they can retain an ammonia smell from urine. Senior cats with mobility issues may have issues entering a litterbox with high sides.
- Litter depth. Provide enough litter that is sufficient to absorb urine. A recommended depth is approximately 3-4 cm.
- Litter type. You may have to experiment with different litter substrates, as individual cats have their preferences. In general, most cats prefer clumping litter that is fine-grained and unscented.
- You may want to avoid using litterbox liners, as many cats find this aversive.
- If you have multiple cats in your household, provide a litterbox per cat and an additional box. For example, if you have 2 cats, you should provide 3 litterboxes in your home.

Multi-Cat Households

The introduction of a new cat to a household can cause stress in both the resident and/or new cat. It's important to understand that cats do not inherently tolerate unfamiliar cats. Competition for resources can cause cats to avoid certain areas or resources, such as litterboxes, food or water, and resting areas.

If you observe signs of conflict between cats in your home, such as staring, avoidance, or hissing, then social stress could be contributing to your cat's inappropriate elimination. If your cat associates the litterbox with a negative experience, such as an aggressive encounter with another cat, they will seek alternative locations to eliminate.

In this case, it is best to separate the litter boxes so the cats do not cross paths. Increasing the number of litterboxes in the home may also help.

Providing multi-perch structures can help with conflicts, as it reduces physical encounters. Supplying multiple sites for food and water access (in addition to multiple litterboxes) for cats in your home can also reduce stress associated with resources. Synthetic pheromones, such as Feliway® may also ease anxiety and stress.

Did You Know?

Feliway® is available for purchase at Bingo's Pet Shop located at the Edmonton Humane Society. All sales proceeds go directly back to the Edmonton Humane Society to help the animals in our care!



Environmental Changes

A change in your schedule, a new household member, or over-stimulation from noise or activity in the home (i.e. home renovations, social gatherings) can stress your cat. Signs of anxiety or stress in cats can include:

- Hiding frequently or for prolonged periods
- Excessive grooming
- Decreased appetite
- Increased vocalizations
- Decreased exploratory or play behaviour
- Increased aggression

Medical Issues

If the cause of your cat's house-soiling is not related to litterbox factors, then it could be associated with a medical condition. For example, a symptom of feline idiopathic cystitis (FIC) can be periuria, or urinating outside of the litterbox. Other issues can include gastrointestinal disease, nutritional disorders, bacterial infections or others.

If your cat is experiencing stress due to another cat in the household or a household disruption, your veterinarian can provide medication temporarily to relieve some anxiety. It's important to understand that medication may only improve house-soiling if the issue is not related to litterbox management, aversions, or inaccessibility.

Addressing Soiled Areas

To avoid your cat using toileting areas outside of the litterbox, ensure you clean soiled locations with an enzymatic cleaner. This type of product removes scents, which is an important factor.

What to AVOID

Here are some things to avoid when addressing unacceptable indoor elimination:

- Punishing your cat for inappropriate elimination. Your cat will not associate the undesired behaviour (soiling outside of the litterbox) with punishment, such as yelling. Rather, this can make your cat fearful of you and the house-soiling will likely not stop.
- Frequently changing the type of litterbox substrate or the location of the litterbox. Once your cat has a preferred litter substrate and/or location to eliminate (typically a quiet, secluded area) try not to make any changes.



Cat Behaviour Guide

Unacceptable Indoor Elimination



- Using ammonia to clean surfaces. To cats, ammonia-based products may be perceived as urine. Therefore, this might be an attractant to eliminate on surfaces or objects cleaned with this type of product.

Finding Help

If you are concerned that your cat's elimination issues are due to a medical condition and/or the behaviour has a sudden onset, seek consultation from a veterinarian.

Did You Know?

You can also ask us behaviour questions by emailing:
askthespecialist@edmontonhumanesociety.com

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. Please [Donate](#).