

# House Soiling



## Why Won't My Cat Use the Litter Box Appropriately?

*The information presented below is not meant to replace proper veterinary care and is not intended to diagnose or treat any physical or behavioral issues. The enclosed information is gathered from both research and our own experiences in our animal sanctuary working with thousands of animals since 1991. This information is intended to be a starting point for you to understand your animals better and to search out the proper help for you and your animal friend.*

House soiling is one of the most common behavior problems reported by cat owners. It is one of the top contributing factors for people surrendering cats to shelters or trying to rehome them. Yet, just how adoptable is a cat who is soiling the house? The situation is frustrating and often becomes life threatening to the cat (in the case that they cannot be rehomed) if a solution cannot be found. The solution to your cat's soiling problem will depend on the underlying causes of their behavior.

From our own experiences, both from having cats in our own homes who have developed this issue, as well as with the hundreds of rescue cats in our sanctuary who have been left homeless because of this issue, we feel we can break this down into two categories – physical causes and emotional causes. It is important to note however that cats who house soil can fall into both categories and frequently it will be physical causes that bring on emotional responses that exacerbate the problem or emotional issues that can contribute to physical problems as well. Thus, we recommend you read through this entire article to see what factors may be affecting your cat. It is also important to take a moment to really look at things through your cat's perspective. Many times, for example, something that may seem like a small change to us humans in our households is actually a major change for a cat. Change can be a key contributor to house soiling. It is important to take a fresh look at things in your home as to how your cat may be experiencing things that are stressful to him/her, even if they don't seem so to you.

### **Physical Causes - Including Medical Issues with Your Cat as Well as Physical Barriers in Your Home**

#### **Medical Problems**

One of the first things to rule out is that your cat is not having a medical problem. Even if your cat is young and/or seems totally healthy, there are many medical issues that could play a factor in house soiling. Conditions that interfere with a cat's normal urination or defecation behavior can cause litter box problems. Inflammation of the urinary tract, as caused by urinary tract infections for example, can make urinating painful and increase the frequency and urgency to urinate. Kidney and thyroid diseases as well as diabetes are also possible causes for a failure to use the litter box. Similarly, digestive tract problems can make it painful for a cat to defecate, increase the urgency or frequency, and decrease a cat's control over defecation. Problems can occur with litter box use if a cat associates use of the box with pain. Also, age-related diseases that interfere with a cat's mobility or with cognitive functioning can interfere with the cat's ability to get to the litter box in time. All of these things are reasons to first take your cat to your veterinarian for an exam to see if there is an underlying medical condition causing the problem.

#### **Litter Box Aversions**

Many cats develop aversions to litter boxes that can be caused by several factors – including the type and/or size of litter box, the type of litter, the location of the box in your home, or a combination of all of these. The first, most important factor, to help your cat use his/her litter box appropriately is to be sure you are providing the right environment to encourage your cat to use the litter box. There are many factors to consider:

1. **Litter box cleanliness** – Most cats do not like to use a litter box that is “dirty.” Dirty to you may not be the same qualifications for your cat. Some are more particular than others, but ideally the litter boxes should be scooped at least once a day, if not more often, especially in the case of a multi-cat household. This one factor – a clean litter box – sometimes makes all the difference to your cat.

2. **Litter box location and numbers** – Another often contributing factor in house soiling is a litter box or litter boxes that are not easily accessible or where there are not enough litter boxes for the number of cats in the household. Rule of thumb is one litter box per two cats. Many cats get territorial about their litter boxes. If you have a multi-cat household, you need to be sure that a more timid cat is not being bullied by a more dominant cat around the litter boxes or while the timid cat is using the litter box. This is a common situation in multi-cat households and can lead to house soiling. You also need to be sure that the litter boxes are located in a place that the cats can get to easily and where they are out of the line of traffic in your household. Cats, like people, often prefer a little privacy. When it comes to litter boxes, indeed, location is everything. Keep in mind as your cat ages, that he/she may not be able to get to the litter box as they did when younger. A common strategy is for people to put litter boxes in their basement so that they are out of the main part of the house. That may work fine as the cat is younger but an elderly cat may start to have issues such as arthritis, vision problems, or even cognitive decline that make it more difficult for them to make the journey down the stairs to the basement. We often place litter boxes in our homes where they are most convenient for us humans but it may be disastrous for your cats if they cannot get to them or if it is so difficult for them to use them that they resort to going elsewhere in your house. Remember ease of use can be super important to your cat and can make a world of difference in your home.

3. **Type of Litter Box** – Litter boxes come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and bells and whistles. These days we even have automatic cleaning litter boxes to make the process easier. Again, what may make it easier for us humans, often clashes with the needs of our cats. There are several factors to keep in mind when assessing what type of litter box is right for your cat. The correct size of the litter box is important. For example, small kittens or cats with any type of disability may have difficulty getting into a litter box that has sides that are too high. Likewise, elderly cats that are developing arthritis or other mobility issues also will have a hard time climbing into a box that is too deep. Obese and very large cats also have issues using boxes that are too small.

Covered boxes are one of the biggest culprits we have found for cats not wanting to use their litter boxes. These boxes really appeal to humans to make the litter box less obvious and to keep smells down and tracking of litter to a minimum. However, here is a clear example of how something designed to help humans may not be so great for your cat. Frequently, cats dislike covered litter boxes because many of them cannot posture properly in the box to urinate or defecate. If you watch how your cat uses their litter box without a lid you may be able to see that they would have trouble getting in the right position with the lid on. Some cats are also really sensitive to the smells that build up within that litter box with the lid. In multiple cat homes, timid cats are often trapped in those covered litter boxes by bullying cats and become afraid to go into the box. In general, if you have a cat with house soiling issues, and you have covered litter boxes, after ruling out medical issues, the first suggestion we have is to take the covers off your boxes. We have seen this solve the problem again and again. It is important to look at your litter boxes and ask yourself from your cat’s perspective if he/she can access and comfortably use the box. It is easy to make some adaptations with litter boxes and it may solve your problem.

4. **Type of Cat Litter** – There are so many different types of cat litter on the market now - from clay and clumping clay to recycled newspaper and pelleted pine and even wheat. There are scented and unscented and different textures and types. It seems endless. No matter what the claims and advertising hype is for each product, the bottom line is will your cat be happy with it. Many times cats find the odor in the fragranced litter to be quite offensive. For some cats, the texture is the most important factor. If it bothers them to walk on it or dig in it, then there is an increased likelihood that they will not use it. Sometimes cats are bothered when the litter type changes all of the time, instead of consistently using the same type. It is important if you change types of litter that you do so gradu-

ally, mixing the new litter in a little at a time.

Left to their own nature, cats normally will seek out sand or dirt outside. And most cats do not like to use places that are already dirty. Households with multiple cats then may have to scoop boxes more often and make sure there are enough boxes in various places throughout your home. We are asked all of the time about what litter we use here in our facility. We do not like to endorse specific products. We can share that we use a pine pelleted litter and have had great success with that over the years in our cat rooms. One reason is that it turns to sawdust as it is used so when we have multiple boxes in the room in multiple stages of dissolving, then it gives the cats multiple choices of textures. We find it great at odor control as well. And for us, we like the biodegradable and chemical free factor too. However, we will share the name of one particular product as we have had some success with this ourselves with stopping house soiling in some cats. The litter is a clumping clay litter (which generally we try to avoid here as there are dangers with that for cats) called “Dr. Elsey’s Cat Attract. This litter was developed by a veterinarian in an effort to stop cats from being euthanized in shelters each year due to being surrendered for house soiling. “Cat Attract” apparently has herbs and things in it which mimic the smell of soil outside. We can tell you that indeed we have seen the use of “Cat Attract” help in some situations.

### **Inappropriate Site Preferences**

When your cat chooses other places other than the litter box to urinate or defecate, it not only could be an aversion to the litter box but rather a preference for another type of surface or texture, or that he/she prefers to do so in another spot. If your cat repeatedly chooses the same spot other than the litter box, it is worth a try to place a litter box in the spot your cat prefers. If your cat is going in multiple places, see if you can find what those places have in common. An example would be a cat that is trying to find something soft to eliminate on – like carpeting or clothing. Or a cat that is choosing a cool tile floor instead of the litter box.

If you can determine what your cat’s pattern is, it will help you to find some solutions to solve the problem. For example, if your cat prefers soft places to eliminate, maybe changing the litter to something soft would help. If she is going only on carpeting, you can try putting a carpet remnant piece in the bottom of the litter box with a little cat litter on top and gradually start adding more litter. If it is smooth, shiny surfaces your cat is attracted to, try putting some tile pieces in the litter box and covering it with a small amount of litter until you can gradually increase it over time.

Helping your cat to avoid areas they are prone to soiling is also a helpful strategy. For example, if your cat likes to urinate on clothing, then picking up your clothing so that he/she cannot get to it would be helpful. You can try things like cleaning products that neutralize the odors using enzymes to stop attracting your cat to those areas. You can also try discouraging them from access to those areas by closing doors and restricting their area. Often it helps to limit them to one room or even a large crate with a litter box to get them used to that litter box before allowing them more freedom. This is especially helpful when introducing a new cat to your household. It is good to be sure the cat knows where its litter box is and don’t just assume he/she will find it on their own.

Use of pheromone products for cats, such as Feliway, may be very helpful. Pheromones are natural chemicals produced by cats that send signals to other cats to convey different things about their territories. For example, when cats rub their cheeks on items such as scratching posts and furniture, and even on you, they release a chemical or pheromone that marks that spot as being safe. Products such as Feliway artificially produce that same pheromone that communicates to cats that “this is a safe space.” Research is showing that this can calm cats in stressful situations by using a way of communication that is very meaningful to them. Pheromone use is particularly good for cats facing emotional and territorial issues.

### **Territorial Marking**

Spraying or marking territory with urine is a natural behavior for both male and female cats. Cats use this be-

havior as a form of communication and it is different than ordinary urination outside of the litter box. Spraying usually involves a small amount of urine sprayed onto walls, furniture, the floor, and occasionally on people's clothing or bedding. Much of this behavior is hormone driven and is helped by having your cats spayed and neutered. However, spayed and neutered pets can also still spray when marking a territory. Territorial marking is a huge topic in and of itself. Cats can start this behavior for many reasons including the addition of a new cat to the household, too many cats in too small a space (creating territory issues between the cats), a stray cat walking through the property that your cats can see from the window, and many other factors. Using pheromone products such as Feliway can help. Reducing stress and making sure your cats have plenty of private "down" time away from each other can also potentially help reduce the cat's need for marking his/her territory.

## **Emotional Causes – Your Cat Has Feelings Just Like You – Change is Hard**

There are many things that happen in our lives that greatly impact the lives of our animals. Some of them are very obvious and others can be more subtle. Animal Communicator Dawn Hayman worked with thousands of cats over a 30-year span that had issues with house soiling. Many times, after any obvious medical conditions were ruled out, the factor most affecting these cats were emotionally based. Sometimes, fixing the issues in the home that were causing the stress would reduce or altogether eliminate the behavior problem. And sometimes the issues were not able to be resolved at all. Let's look at some of the most common causes of these stressors that Dawn identified from cats and take a look at your own cats and see if any of these factors could be contributing to or causing this behavior in your home.

The key factor upsetting cats is, not surprisingly, change or stress. Let's face it, change is hard for us humans as well. But what many people don't necessarily recognize at first is what actually might constitute change or cause stress in your cats' lives. What may seem trivial to us may be huge to them.

1. **Moving** – Moving is most always stressful on everyone – your pets included. There are many factors in moving into a new place to consider. Sometimes it is best to start your cat out in one room in your new home until they get used to all of the new sounds, smells, and new surroundings. Especially at first when you may still be unpacking and rearranging furniture etc. There also may be smells in your new home that are there from previous animal residents. Don't assume that your cat will automatically figure out where the litter boxes are in your new home. Some cats are more brave and curious than others and more easily adapt to and explore their new surroundings. While other cats may need more time to explore their new world in baby steps. It is important to understand the needs of your cat as each cat is different in how they approach and interact in their environment.

2. **Remodeling/Redecorating** – Obviously big renovation type work in your home is a big deal and can trigger enormous stress for your cat. In those times, it is probably best to limit your cat to a quiet room with their litter box so that they can feel safer. As noted above, every cat handles stress and changes differently, just like people. It is up to us as caretakers to try to read each cat and each situation. One thing that sometimes gets missed as a cause of stress is moving furniture around, redecorating your home, or even just moving the litter box location. These things can become very disruptive to your cat's daily routine and can cause issues to develop.

3. **Changes with Family Members** – Human family changes can impact our animals' lives greatly. This can include: the birth of a child, a marriage and welcoming a new spouse to the family, other people moving into the household, children moving out, death of a family member or other pet, or divorce etc. The interactions between humans in the family also can affect cats greatly. Animal communicator Dawn Hayman has had many consultations with cats not using the litter box appropriately. Many times, the cats described tension in the human family not only causing stress, but the cats communicated to Dawn that the cats were trying to help the situation by bringing it into balance by urinating around the house. A cat soiling the house obviously doesn't make the human

stress better, and to us humans, this perspective may seem bizarre. But cats use urine marking for many things. And for them, it is a tool they use to leave markers for other cats. In other words, it is a form of communication. Unfortunately for the cats, we humans do not understand that they are simply trying to tell us something and we often then begin scolding them or using deterrents such as spray bottles etc. that just make the situation even worse.

4. **Space – Too Much/Too Little** – Just like people, cats have varying needs of how much space they need around them to be happy. Some cats have large territory needs and others have small ones. Other factors also contribute to this such as how many cats are sharing the space and how the cats are interacting in that space. We discussed above how important it is to have enough litter boxes available in a multi-cat household and to be sure there isn't a cat bullying others so that they feel insecure about being trapped in the litter box. But an equally challenging problem is when a cat feels insecure because their space feels too large for them. For these cats, it is best to limit their area, such as to one room, until they feel safe enough to want to explore further.

### **Tessie's Story – A Case History in House Soiling and the Importance of Understanding Your Cat's Perspective and Needs – by Dawn Hayman**

At first, you may think that I made up this story to illustrate just how much we humans can misunderstand our cats and their needs. But I assure you that this is an actual real life story. I first met Tessie, a calico cat, as an animal communication client. Her person called me because Tessie was peeing and pooping in the bathtub and for some reason was now refusing to use her litter box. Tessie was about 7 years old and had never had any such issues before this. A quick check in with Tessie and she communicated to me that there was a lot of change in her life and it was very difficult for her to keep up. She felt she wasn't being heard or listened to and she was really unhappy but no one was noticing. As I gently asked some questions of Tessie's person, the woman assured me that absolutely nothing had changed in Tessie's life at all. But if she continued this behavior she was going to have to euthanize her. As soon as Tessie heard that ultimatum, she said to me, "See, what's the point?" And then Tessie shut down and refused to communicate with me anymore.

I knew from many years of experience that this was not going to be resolved. The person just wanted the behavior to change and the cat kept insisting there was a problem but wasn't being heard. I had done a series of 3 consultations to no avail. It was on that third consultation after asking this person several times if anything in Tessie's life had changed that she finally said something that made me push a little further. Her response was, "Well nothing that would change a cat's life. She has always had a roof over her head and food and is well taken care of." Then I asked, has anything changed in YOUR life recently? Bingo.

In the two years prior, here is what Tessie's human family went through. There were originally two cats in the household. The family went on vacation and left the cats with a house sitter. While they were away, Tessie's cat friend died a very difficult death in an accident that Tessie witnessed. In fact, Tessie was seen trying to help her friend and stayed with her until a human found them. Within a couple of months after that, the husband and wife divorced and Tessie, the woman, and her daughter moved to a small apartment from a large house. A few months after that, the daughter moved out of the apartment as she left for college. Tessie was very bonded to that daughter. A few months after that, the woman started a new relationship and in a short time moved in to the new partner's house – with 6 other cats who had lived there together for years. Tessie was terrified and hid a lot. One of the other cats picked on Tessie a lot and Tessie barely came out of hiding. She would often hide in the bathroom. And that is when she started peeing and pooping in the tub. When I asked if a litter box was put in there for her, I was told absolutely not. The boxes were kept in one place in the house and that was the rule.

I was flabbergasted that with all this change that I now knew about, that the woman still insisted for Tessie, it should not have been stressful at all. "That kind of stress doesn't affect animals," she assured me. Well, in my expe-

rience, that kind of stress absolutely affects animals – just as much as it does humans. So many things could have been done differently for Tessie that potentially could have prevented that behavior from starting in the first place. But with the woman not wanting to put any more effort into trying, Tessie was thrown outside where she spent countless hours for days crying at the windows day and night until the decision was made to have her euthanized.

It turns out that all Tessie really wanted was a quiet space of her own and a place to feel like she belonged to someone. I know this first hand because I ended up adopting Tessie myself. We went through a lot together before she healed her wounds of loss and despair. But it was a journey worth taking.

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*Spring Farm CARES is a not-for-profit animal and nature sanctuary in upstate New York.*

*Contact us: Spring Farm CARES, 3364 State Route 12, Clinton, NY 13323*

*Phone: (315) 737-9339 / Email: [information@springfarmcares.org](mailto:information@springfarmcares.org)*

*Dawn E. Hayman is co-founder of Spring Farm CARES*

*and has been a professional Animal Communicator since 1987.*

*For more information, go to [www.springfarmcares.org/dawn.htm](http://www.springfarmcares.org/dawn.htm)*