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## **The Litter Pan Blues**

There's a dirty little secret that no one likes to talk about. I usually find out about it just as I am finishing a wellness check up. I've spent lots of time asking if there are any concerns and getting a detailed history and just as we are walking out the door, I hear "Well Doc, there is one thing, Fluffy's been leaving me little presents around the house." There it is, the dirty secret. Most people bring up their cat's elimination problems as an afterthought. The expectation often seems to be that there is a simple 5-second answer to this complicated behavior. When people think about it and start understanding the scope of the issues that contribute to this behavior, they rapidly see that it's a 5 hour discussion, not 5 minutes. It is a true life threatening condition as it is one of the main reasons that cats are euthanized in this country

Let's get our terminology straight first. Cats that squat in a normal position to urinate on a horizontal surface, like a floor or bed, are *inappropriately urinating* (IU). Cats that stand up and urinate on a vertical surface, like a wall or draperies, are *spraying*. Cats that stool outside the litter pan are *inappropriately defecating* (ID). Spraying is a special circumstance and is associated with marking territory to feel more comfortable and confident. Using Feliway diffusers and limiting line of sight and sound of other cats can really help with the territorial kitties. Your veterinarian can discuss other behavioral and medical strategies for this. Occasionally a spraying kitty will have a medical problem so don't overlook that.

There are 3 basic reasons for inappropriate urination or defecation. They are easy to state, but cover a huge range of issues. I'll try to give a brief overview of each. You should contact a veterinarian who is willing to thoroughly work up behavior issues to get into the details of your specific case. Elimination problems don't happen because your cat is mad at you or because of other human emotional motivations. Most of the time we are way too anthropomorphic and lacking in "cat-itude" to see what really motivates our cats. The 3 reasons that cats in this category will go outside the pan are 1) medical issues, 2) an aversion to the pan, and 3) an affinity for another substrate. There you go. That covers about 95% of the problem. Let's take them one at a time so you can understand things more fully.

### **Medical Issues**

If urinating is painful, cats will often inappropriately urinate. Think about when you have a bladder infection. Just a drop or two of urine makes your bladder spasm and you feel like you have to go right now. Interstitial cystitis, infections, stones and tumors are some of the things that cause painful bladders. Crampy colons with diarrhea or other abnormal stool can result in cats who inappropriately defecate (ID). Think about how hard it is for you to hold it under similar circumstances. Always, always do a thorough medical evaluation for any elimination problem. Cats are masters at hiding their signs of illness. The behavior may be the only thing you see and sometimes they really make you jump through hoops to find the problem. Just looking once may not be enough.

## Aversion to the Pan.

This covers a huge territory. It can involve every thing from not liking what's in the box, where it is, what it's like, how to get to it, and who's looking at me while I'm getting there. Pretty much, whatever the cat is doing under these circumstances is normal behavior for the cat. They are making choices that involve a cleaner or less stressed experience. We put the word "inappropriate" in there because they aren't voiding in a place where we want them to. I am often shocked and amazed at the conditions that litter pans are kept in. It is a miracle to me that there are as many cats using the pans as there are. Litter pan conditions that are unacceptable to the cat account for many of IU issues. Think about going into the bathroom at an airport. If you have the choice of using a clean stall, I bet you take it every time. If you use clay litter, scoop it daily and totally change it at least every week, if not more often. If you use scooping litter, make sure it is strong and holds a clump when you tap on it. If it breaks apart when the cat dances around on it and you can't scoop out the "mini clumps" it's not going to do its job. Scoop scooping litter every day and change it at least every few weeks or whenever you can detect that it is soiled. The rule book says that you need one litter pan per cat, plus one. So get those extra pans out and place them so that cats can access one if they don't want to go to another. Make sure the pan is big enough. The pan should be one and a half times the length of the cat. Take the hood off the pan. It traps odor and limits the options for an escape route if need be.

That escape route is very important. So is getting there without somebody giving you the evil eye. Many, many cats that inappropriately eliminate do it because they are stressed or fearful of other cats in the household. Intercat Aggression (ICA) does not have to mean a fight. Cats, just like people, will go along way to avoid conflict. When you see a fight, it's because all the other coping mechanisms have broken down. Think about when you have to work with someone that you don't like. You do a lot of things to avoid running into them. If you didn't want to take a chance of meeting them in the bathroom on the first floor, you might choose to go to the second. A cat-centric veterinarian will take a detailed history and help you develop behavior modification strategies to change the stress level in the home.

## Affinity To Another Substrate

If inappropriate elimination goes on long enough, or the inciting factor was strong enough, it will become a learned behavior. That means that the cat who had pain in the litter pan, but no pain on the bed, may choose the bed. They're kitties. They don't process all that well. If somebody swats at you 3 out of 10 times going to the litter pan and nobody swats at you when you go on the towels, then it's a happier thing. Affinity to another substrate is usually secondary to aversion. Again, there are behavior modification strategies to use to try and change their perception. Very rarely a cat will come into the world with a primary preference for smooth surfaces or carpet-like textures. There are protocols to help work with these guys as well.

## Get Help

Don't wait until a problem has been going on for months or years. The longer a behavior occurs, the harder it is to change. Don't put up with it for 5 years and decide to address it when you get new carpet. Many times, making the litter pan experience as happy and low stress as possible can get cats back to using it the way we want. But sometimes finding the right strategies can be a challenge. It can be frustrating and take a great deal of time and energy. Be prepared to make some changes in your own behavior. Expect to have a lot of time devoted to helping you figure out what will work in your household and expect to pay for it. A veterinarian helping you with a

behavior consult is taking a lot of time to get you answers using the knowledge that they have gotten from hours of study and years of experience. Think about how much you pay a lawyer or accountant for their advice. Recognize the value of the service that your vet is giving you. Together you can develop a plan to keep you happy with your cat and keep your cat happy in the household.

Some Helpful Resources.

From The Cat's Point Of View by Gwen Bohnenkamp

This is a wonderful book that helps you see your cat's behaviors from their more realistic animal view. It's a quick and fun read.

The Indoor Cat Initiative      <http://www.vet.ohio-state.edu/indoorcat.htm>

A wonderful web site from The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine. It addresses how we can structure our cat's environment to help them overcome some of the stresses of modern American life, i.e., staying inside and being unable to experience their "job" of predator as well as having to live with cats they may not like.