

Health and welfare information about your cat from Vetlexicon Felis.



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Inappropriate elimination

Inappropriate elimination is defined as any episode of urination or defaecation outside of the area where the pet has been trained to go. A behaviour problem can cause inappropriate elimination, but medical issues should always be investigated first. If the problem is medical, treatment depends on the underlying cause. Behavioural problems may resolve with improved training, stress management, and/or anti-anxiety medications. The treatment plan should never include punishment.

What is inappropriate elimination?

When we think about inappropriate elimination, we probably picture a male cat "spraying" or a male dog using urine to mark territory. However, inappropriate elimination can also be displayed by females, and it doesn't always involve urine - it may involve depositing faeces in unusual areas.

Even though inappropriate elimination is clearly undesirable, it does not always mean the pet has a "problem". Sometimes, it can mean the pet is confused about house-training or is using urine and faeces to communicate with other pets or family members. For example, a cat may use urine to notify other cats of where its territory is. Often, urine marking occurs near doors and windows to communicate to neighbourhood tomcats wandering through the garden. Although this is a normal behaviour in cats, most owners consider it unacceptable or "inappropriate" when it occurs in the house. Similarly, submissive urination can occur when a dog feels nervous or threatened. In this case, urination is the dog's way of communicating that he or she is not a threat and is submitting to the owner's (or other person's) dominance. This is a normal method of communication for the dog and is not technically a behavioural problem, but it is considered inappropriate by the owner and can quickly become a nuisance.

Sometimes, inappropriate elimination does indicate an actual behavioural or emotional problem - hormones may be involved, as well as stress or anxiety. Any changes in the household, such as the addition of children or other pets, workers in the house, or a recent vacation by the owner, may stress or confuse pets and lead to this behaviour.

The first thing to remember about inappropriate elimination is that in many cases, the problem is not behavioural. It is important to see a vet as soon as possible so any medical causes can be investigated. Ultimately, treatment of the problem depends on the underlying cause.

What are the medical causes of inappropriate elimination?

Changes in a pet's toilet habits can be caused by a variety of medical problems, including:

- **Diabetes and kidney disease:** In dogs and cats, both of these diseases cause increased drinking and urination and can cause some pets to have urinary accidents in the house.
- **Thyroid disease in cats; Cushings disease in dogs:** These illnesses cause increased drinking and urination, which can lead to accidents around the house.
- **Urinary tract infection, bladder stones, prostate disease (in dogs), and bladder cancer:** These illnesses can cause pets to have urinary accidents.
- **Diarrhoea:** This can cause faecal accidents in dogs and cats.
- **Cognitive dysfunction syndrome:** This is a type of dementia that can occur in ageing dogs and cats. Some pets with this condition seem to forget their house-training and can have urinary and faecal accidents in the house.

- **Seizures:** Pets can urinate or defaecate while having a seizure. If you did not witness the episode, you may come home and find urine or faeces on the floor without any indication that the soiling occurred during a seizure.
- **Incontinence:** Pets that have lost the ability to control expulsion of urine or faeces (often due to age or spinal injury) deposit waste inappropriately because they can't 'hold' it for the proper time and location. They may even have accidents while sleeping.
- **Joint pain/arthritis:** A cat with arthritis pain may not be able to climb into a litterbox, causing the cat to relieve itself outside the litterbox. Similarly, a dog with arthritis may be too painful to make it outside before having an accident.
- **Constipation (in cats):** A cat that associates pain with defaecation may develop an aversion to the litterbox and prefer to defaecate in other areas.

What behavioural problems can cause inappropriate elimination?

The following behavioural factors can also be involved in causing inappropriate elimination:

- **Litterbox aversion in cats:** A cat may have this problem because:
 - The litterbox is not clean enough.
 - The litterbox is in an unfavourable location.
 - The cat may not like the type of litter.
 - The cat may prefer not to share the litterbox with other cats.
- **Submissive urination:** A dog may urinate when he or she feels threatened. Urination is a way to show submission.
- **Urine marking:** This can occur because of territorial, sexual, or other reasons.
- **Stress or anxiety:** This can include separation anxiety.
- **Incomplete house-training.**

How will my vet diagnose the problem?

Owner observation and medical history are very important for diagnosing the cause of inappropriate elimination. For example, if you have a cat that is spraying (or urine marking), he is likely to stand upright with his tail erect and spray a small amount of urine on walls and

other vertical surfaces; occasionally, a marking cat may spray on horizontal surfaces, such as bedding or laundry. This is different from a cat that is simply urinating outside the litterbox due to a medical problem and is not attempting to mark his territory. A cat with a medical problem will generally squat and eliminate urine on a horizontal surface. Other useful historical information includes how long the problem has been going on, how often the events happen, whether any other signs of illness (such as vomiting or appetite loss) have been observed, and if any environmental changes or alterations in your pet's normal routine occurred around the time the problem started.

Your vet will perform a physical examination and may begin the diagnostic process by recommending some tests:

- **Urinalysis**
- **Faecal analysis**
- **Chemistry panel and CBC (complete blood cell count):** These blood tests may show evidence of diabetes, kidney disease, or other medical causes of the problem.
- **Radiographs (x-rays):** These can help check for bladder stones and a variety of other abnormalities.

Depending on the results of these tests, your vet may recommend more specific tests to screen for Cushing's disease in dogs, thyroid disease in cats, or other medical problems.

Once medical causes of inappropriate elimination are ruled out, diagnostic efforts may focus more on possible behavioural causes. In some cases, a consultation with a veterinary behaviour specialist or certified trainer may be recommended.

How can inappropriate elimination be treated?

If the problem is medical, treatment should target the underlying condition. For behavioural issues, there are many ways to approach treatment. Punishment is **never** part of the treatment plan.

If a pet is marking and is not already spayed or neutered, having this surgical procedure done can eliminate the problem. It is also helpful to use odour-eliminating products so the pet can't smell the marked areas. Keeping the pet away from the areas that were previously marked is sometimes helpful.

Reducing stress in the pet's environment may help some types of inappropriate elimination. Synthetic pheromone products are available from your vet in spray or plug-in diffuser forms. These products have a calming effect on many pets.

To discourage neighbourhood cats from approaching doors and windows, consider using a spray deterrent that is activated by motion detectors. In addition, provide your pets (especially cats) with a place such as a room, cubby, or perch where they can escape from children or other pets. If all else fails, ask your vet if anti-anxiety medications may be appropriate for your pet.

For dogs with submissive urination, positive reinforcement training and behaviour modification techniques (such as interacting with the dog in a less threatening manner) are often helpful. Many puppies with this problem simply outgrow it without the need for treatment.

Many dogs and cats lose their homes (and their lives, through euthanasia) due to inappropriate elimination, so it is not a small problem. Getting your pet to your vet right away is the best way to solve the problem before your patience runs out.