



# Birchwood Animal Hospital

For the love of animals since 1959

## BIRCHWOOD ANIMAL HOSPITAL

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## LITTER-ATURE

One of the most amazing things about kittens is how they almost invariably learn how to use the litter box immediately after coming into a new home.

It is somewhat ironic then that the most common behavioural problem seen in adult cats is the apparent loss of this litter training when the cat begins to urinate outside of the box. This is often immensely frustrating to the owner and, in some cases, ultimately life threatening to the cat as some owners will, in desperation, turn to euthanasia as their last resort.

Fortunately though, as we come to understand more and more about this problem it has become obvious that there is a wide range of better solutions.



First, it is important to distinguish between "**Spraying**" and "**Inappropriate urination**".

**SPRAYING** = urination (there is no special "spray" substance, it is all urine although it may seem to have a particularly strong odor) against a vertical surface (although rarely it can also be horizontally on clothing and shoes); common examples include walls, doors and sides of furniture. This behaviour is in many cases a result of "territorial stress" and is a territorial marking behaviour. It is more common in un-neutered and un-spayed cats, but can very easily occur in neutered and spayed ones as well.

**INAPPROPRIATE URINATION** = urination against a horizontal surface, just like in the litter box, but without the litter box being there; common examples include on carpet, furniture cushions, clothing and laundry baskets. This behaviour is more complex than spraying. It is unfortunately often interpreted by the owner as a hostile act directed against them, but this is **not** the case, rather, anxiety, medical problems, litter box problems and a variety of environmental stresses are the most common causes.

### What To Do?

✓ **You must define the type (spray vs. inappropriate urination) and find the cause, and you must do so soon to avoid it becoming an ingrained habit -- talk to your veterinarian right away!**

In most cases an examination and urine, and possibly blood, tests will be recommended to rule out medical causes. This also gives you the opportunity to discuss with the doctor whether it is spraying or inappropriate urination.

✓ **If it is "spraying", your options include:**

#### **Look for potential causes of territorial stress:**

- Is it possible that your cat can see other cats in the neighborhood through the window? It is important to recognize that your cat will be aware of other animals outside (even when it is inside) that you are not aware of.
- Do you have three or more cats in your household? Although they may all seem to tolerate and even be affectionate with each other, there is often low-level chronic territorial stress in multiple cat households. If you can identify a cause that you can eliminate (admittedly difficult), then do so. Otherwise you may wish to talk to your veterinarian about medication that curbs the territorial instinct.

- Although spraying is, as stated above, usually a territorially driven behaviour unrelated to litter box issues, it can, nevertheless, also help to make the litter box as attractive to use as possible. This is described in detail in the next section.

✓ **If it is "inappropriate urination", your options include:**

**Treat underlying medical causes that the veterinarian may identify.**

Tests may, for example, find:

- Bladder Infection (Bacterial Cystitis): usually readily cured with antibiotics.
- "F.I.C." (Feline Idiopathic or Interstitial Cystitis): irritation of the bladder wall. The cause is often unknown, but stress may play a role and we also suspect that many cats do not take in enough fluids and consequently produce a too concentrated (not watery enough) urine that may irritate the bladder. This is treated with a variety of medications (anti-inflammatories and/or anti-stress agents, for example), encouraging improved moisture intake and patience (some cases are self-limiting).
- Bladder Stones or Crystals (very small, sand-like stones): these may irritate the bladder and, particularly in males, may cause a life-threatening obstruction of the urine. This is generally treated with combination of diet and medication to break down the crystals and relax the urethral muscles (making it easier to pass crystals). Urinary catheterization or surgery may be necessary in some cases.

**Look for obvious causes of stress.**

- This is often difficult as cats may seem perfectly happy and content, yet be quite anxious about seemingly trivial or undetectable changes in their environment or routine. Obvious stressors, however, include:  
Recent move into a new home.  
Change in the family such as a new baby or family breakup.  
Change in the routine such as someone working who was previously at home or cat being left alone for a weekend while the owners are away.  
Other new pets.
- Although these stressors are frequently not things that can be readily changed, cats will often eventually adapt to the new circumstances. In the meantime the measures listed below, especially section (d) to prevent a habit from forming, and section (f) discussing using anti-anxiety medications, can be useful.

**Make the litter box as attractive to use as possible.**

- Cats can be very particular about the litter box and can become even more so with time; in cats without an underlying medical problem, unhappiness with the litter box is the most common cause for inappropriate urination.
- *Clean the box daily. Even twice daily for some cats!*
- *Have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats. Sometimes one extra one in addition to the one per cat is useful.*
- *Do not use a covered box. It concentrates odors and many cats are nervous about using a box where they can't see out.*
- *Do not use scented litter.*
- *Do not change a type of litter that has been working fine in the past.*
- *Do not clean the box with harsh or scented cleansers that may leave a residual smell. Try to just use hot water.*
- *Do not place the litter box somewhere where the cat might be disturbed or where loud noises (washing machine, furnace fan etc.) are generated.*
- *Make sure children or other pets are not disturbing the cat at the box.*



If none of the above helps, try getting another box and placing it at the area where the cat is inappropriately urinating. If the cat begins to use that box it can gradually be moved to a more appropriate location.

**Make the area of inappropriate urination as unattractive as possible.**

The original stimulus for the problem (stress, dirty litter box etc.) may be long gone, but cats are creatures of habit and may be continually re-attracted to the same spot by memory and their excellent sense of smell, despite careful cleaning. Therefore it is important to make that area(s) as unattractive as possible:

- If practical, deny access to the area by closing doors, covering laundry hampers, putting shoes in closets, moving furniture to cover the spot etc.
- Where access can't be denied, try covering the spot with plastic or tinfoil as some cats will not urinate on such surfaces. Upside down plastic carpet runners work well as a deterrent.
- Mothballs can be used as a repellent in some areas.
- Feeding the cat on the spot may inhibit it from urinating there.
- Place cat toys in the area, this may discourage inappropriate elimination behaviour.

**Complete Re-training may be necessary.**

In certain cases where it appears that the behaviour is mostly persisting because of habit, it may be necessary to try to completely re-train the cat by confining him to a single room with the litter box in one corner and food and water in the far corner (not too close together, they don't like that!). This requires dedication and persistence as the cat may need to be confined to this room for weeks or even months until it is safe to let him out again – not many people are able to withstanding the howling and pleading looks that this can generate.

**Medication may be useful in some cases.**

In cases where there are no underlying medical issues and where the above measures aren't helpful, the veterinarian may prescribe medication. This is especially useful in cases where stress or anxiety is suspected as a contributing factor.

Modern anti-anxiety medications for cats can be very effective in treating inappropriate urination with minimal or no side-effects. Depending on the individual case either short term or long term treatment may be required, although a month is generally the bare minimum.

In addition to the pills mentioned above a pheromone spray can be useful. Pheromones are odorless airborne chemicals released by animals that influence behaviour and mood. "Feliway" is a feline facial pheromone spray that makes **cats feel content and relaxed and can thus be useful in the treatment of inappropriate urination.** This product is available at our hospital.

<http://www.feliway.com/us>



**Some notes in conclusion:**

\* Early intervention and a measure of patience are key to success. Our options are somewhat reduced when people come in saying that their cat has urinated out of the box for months and that they are now at the end of their ropes.

\* Stress and anxiety play a big role in many of the causes of spraying and inappropriate urination, yet very few people perceive their own cats as being subject to any particular stress or anxiety. Please remember that these stressed cats may not behave differently in any other way and that there may not be any obvious changes in the environment or routine. Cats are mysterious creatures with unreadable thoughts who hear, see and smell all sorts of things we are ignorant of!

\* There is increasing evidence that insufficient water intake is playing a role in some of these cats by causing the urine to be too concentrated. Therefore it's always wise to feed at least some canned food (which is 80% moisture) to enforce a minimum level of moisture intake. Also, it is important to offer water in what ever form the cat prefers. Some like warm, some like cold, some like fresh, some like stale, some prefer a dish, some prefer a bowl, some prefer dripping water and some even prefer the toilet or the bathtub! Whatever the preference, it's important to be aware of what the preference is and cater to it.