

Feline housesoiling

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Many cats lose their homes and lives simply because they eliminate in areas other than their litter boxes. Cat owners are often unaware that treatment is available. In fact, the prognosis for resolving housesoiling in cats is often very good.

As with the successful treatment of all behavior problems, an accurate diagnosis is needed. This includes identifying any medical conditions that might contribute to the soiling. Successful management of underlying diseases including diabetes, renal disease, and structural or infectious lower urinary tract disease can improve a patient's litter box habits. The complex syndrome often referred to as idiopathic cystitis also needs to be managed for a good outcome.

Housecats usually eliminate outside their boxes for one of two reasons. The behavior may be related to a toileting problem. Or the deposits may serve a communication function. Cats can leave messages by marking with either urine or feces. Free-running cats do so multiple times per day. Urine-marking is more common than fecal marking, and less tolerable, since urine is harder to discover and harder to clean than feces.

Careful history-taking will differentiate inappropriate toileting from urine marking. If a home visit is not possible, ask clients for pictures and videos of the environment. Include footage of the cat interacting with household pets and people.

Urine marking

Diagnosis

Evidence of discord in the relationship of the cat with household residents would support the diagnosis of urine marking.

Changes in the routine, including new work-schedules or feeding regimens, can trigger marking. The timing and location of the deposits should support the diagnosis.

Cats mark in socially significant areas or on significant objects. Unlike toileting problems, marking behavior can occur more or less frequently than normal elimination.

Treatment

Treatment of marking behavior includes environmental and behavioral modification. It may be possible to eliminate some triggers, or at least minimize exposure. Behavior modification can reduce a cat's reaction to the inciting factors that must remain, and can be used to improve social relationships. Some cases of feline marking benefit from pharmacological intervention.

Inappropriate toileting

Diagnosis

The value of careful history taking cannot be overstated. You can never know too much about the state of the litter box. Cats will boycott boxes if the boxes are dirty, inaccessible, or in some cases, inconvenient to access. Boxes that are too small or are located in noisy areas may be avoided. Unacceptable litter type or depth can cause a cat to leave its box untouched.

Inappropriate toileting may develop due to a litter box aversion, substrate aversion, substrate preference, or location preference. By the time the patient presents, more than one diagnosis

may be present.

Treatment

Treatment can actually be simple. The goal is to create the perfect litter box and put it in the perfect spot. Clients are usually okay with the idea of modifying the box. There may be some balking about changing litter type. But be prepared for resistance should there be a need to change the location of the litter box.

Treatment of substrate aversion or litter box aversion involves some testing. Although scientific studies may suggest common preferences, it is always important to “ask” your patient, the cat in question. A litter cafeteria is the best way to learn. When there is no space for a veritable cafeteria, paired tests can be done. The choices must be provided in the same area however. Litter type and depth as well as litter box size and style should be tested.

The cat that exhibits a location preference may initially need a litter box in that favorite location. If a cat will not travel to the litter box, for whatever reason, then housesoiling will continue. Even while suggesting that a litter box be placed in the formal dining room, try to assure clients that there is every chance to believe that with time, once the cat has begun to use the box regularly, the box may very gradually be returned to a location that is more acceptable to the family. As the box is moved, placing food or toys in the original location can change the function of that area and facilitate following the litter box out of the area. In some cases, the original location may be made less attractive by applying a citrus scent or double-sided tape.

In general, pharmacological intervention is not indicated for cats that are diagnosed with housesoiling secondary to litter box aversion, location preference, or substrate preference. If there is an aversion secondary to a fear response, then anxiety-reducing medication may be indicated. Prescribing an analgesic would be appropriate for the cat that avoids its box due to physical discomfort. Consider the position that the cat must assume in order to access and eliminate in the box.

The prognosis for controlling feline inappropriate toileting is often very good. The prognosis for controlling marking behavior can be good as well, depending on the triggers. In general, it is more difficult to manage elimination disorders in multi-cat homes. Before drastic measures are taken, be sure to confirm the culprit. Just because a cat has been caught does not mean that he is the only one responsible for the inappropriate behavior!

Most challenging to manage are patients that exhibit both inappropriate toileting and marking behavior. Regular follow-up reports by the client will improve the outcome as adjustments to therapy may be implemented in a timely manner.

Behavioral Myths—What you need to know to be an accurate source of information

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In this age of technology, there are countless forums for a discussion of virtually any topic. Including pet behavior. Much of this freely available information has not been vetted and may not be scientifically sound. Sometimes, misinformation can be dangerous to the health of people and pets. It behooves the veterinary team to be the go-to source for scientifically sound information regarding behavior. Let's start by dispelling some popular misconceptions.

Fact or Fiction?

FICTION: Puppies should stay home until they have completed their full vaccination series.

In **FACT**, by the time a puppy receives her last vaccination, her sensitive period for socialization will probably have ended. What does that mean? Dogs are most flexible and most able to easily accept novel stimuli between the ages of 4 weeks and 14 weeks. During that time period, puppies tend to accept new people, animals, sights and sounds as part of their world. As this sensitive period ends, puppies often exhibit more caution, which can transition into fear or even aggression.

The biggest risk to a puppy's life is not a communicable disease but rather the development of a behavior problem. Many undesirable behaviors can be prevented through early education of people and their pups.

Of course there must be some safety guidelines associated with socializing young puppies. Puppies should visit locations where healthy puppies and dogs visit. Before recommending a puppy socialization class, be sure that all puppies have received both an initial vaccination and an examination by a veterinarian to assure that there are no signs of illness. Better still, why not run your own classes?

Fact or Fiction?

FICTION: Confrontational training techniques do no harm.

In **FACT**, confrontational training techniques may actually contribute to the development of aggressive and fear-based behaviors. While some correction based maneuvers and gadgets may at first glance seem glamorous and impressive, punishment based training strategies are typically designed to instill fear. Your clients do not really want their dogs to be afraid of them! Veterinary team members should be prepared to offer clients viable

alternatives to risky procedures, and to explain the reasoning for these recommendations.

Fact or fiction?

FICTION: Some breeds are too stubborn or aggressive to respond to “treat” based training.

In **FACT**, all animals deserve humane handling in all aspects of their lives including their training. There are many reasons that an individual animal may not respond to a particular training routine. The problem may lie in the animal’s ability to perceive the presented cue. For instance, there may be a sensory or cognitive deficit. The animal may be distressed or anxious, in which case learning cannot occur. There may be a flaw in the manner of training, with an inappropriate delivery of reinforcers, selection of reinforcers, or application of cues. Most animals are not stubborn, but rather inadequately motivated. Help clients find a trainer who is patient, creative and willing to think outside the box rather than one that encourages confrontations.

Keep this fact in mind that when recommending a training technique for an “aggressive dog”: most of our canine patients exhibit aggressive behavior because they are afraid. Training is about communicating not dominating.

In **FACT**, it is **FICTION** that aggressive dogs are trying to dominate their owners.

For years it was suggested that young dogs needed to be suppressed lest they climb a proverbial ladder and try to dominate the household. This way of thinking contributed to the persistence of confrontational training methods designed to squelch behaviors. Instead of being humanely taught how to exhibit desirable, appropriate behaviors, dogs faced punishment when they performed normal yet undesirable behaviors.

As behavioral science has advanced, it has become apparent that most dogs aggressively threaten their owners not because they are trying to dominate but because they are anxious or fearful. It is a **FACT** that punishment routinely increases fear. Many dogs exhibit defensive aggression when frightened. Ultimately, many of these dogs learn to exhibit a more offensive aggression to resolve conflict.

FICTION: Most behavior problems are rooted in dogs trying to be “dominant”.

In **FACT**, behaviors that are often considered problematic are perfectly normal behaviors for dogs. Quite simply, dogs pull, jump, and chew things because these behaviors produce their own rewards. Pull hard and a dog can get somewhere faster. Jump high allows a small to be petted sooner. And of course dogs try to chew our possessions. Dogs explore their environments with their mouths, and apparently take pleasure in chewing or there would not be so very many chew toys on the market! There is no suggestion that dogs indulge in these pleasurable activities in order to gain seek status or dominance in their relationships. Remember **KISS!**

Fact or Fiction?

FICTION: Pets that destroy things or urinate inside when alone are spiteful.

In FACT, pets that exhibit undesirable behaviors when they are left alone, and exclusively when left alone, are usually suffering from separation related distress. They are not spiteful but rather anxious and need help. They should never be punished so please explain to your clients that it is not appropriate to return home only to scold or worse, rub a pet's nose in the "mess". Schedule a behavior consult for them. Help your clients rebuild good feelings and repair that damaged bond.

Fact or Fiction?

FICTION: Puppies are a clean slate.

In FACT, a puppy's behavior is influenced by his genetic make up, his early environment, and yes, to a degree, his present environment. But when problematic behaviors develop, don't blame the owner. Owners cannot be held entirely responsible for the behavior of their future dog. The veterinary team can offer appropriate preventative services and counseling to help each puppy live up to his potential and his owner's goals.

Fact or Fiction?

FICTION: Gentle handling and attention to behavior takes too much time.

In FACT an hour of prevention may be worth a lifetime of cure. Yes, it takes time to attend to behavior and welfare. The results are priceless.