

Feline problem behaviours in the home and what to do about them



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
The Royal (Dick) School
of Veterinary Studies

The Jeanne Marchig
International Centre for
Animal Welfare Education

Introduction:

Cats can develop problem behaviours for many reasons and it is important to rule out any possible medical causes as part of the general consultation when you are presented with a patient displaying this behaviour.

The following are common problems behaviours that domesticated cats sometimes display with a short discussion on possible medical causes and, once those have been ruled out, what environmental factors must also be taken in to consideration when trying to reduce the problem behaviour in question.

Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD) is not a specific disease, but is the term used to describe conditions that can affect the urinary bladder and/or urethra (the lower urinary tract) of cats.

Signs of FLUTD may include:

- **Dysuria** - The cat straining to pass urine and crying out if it is painful.
- **Pollakiuria** - An increase in the cat urinating as infection and inflammation of the bladder and urethra will cause irritation and increase the desire for the cat to urinate more frequently
- **Haematuria** – blood in the urine
- **Periuria** – urinating outside the litter tray and in unusual or inappropriate places. This can happen because the pain, irritation and inflammation in the bladder or urethra causes an urgent need to urinate, and so the cat may not have time to get to the litter tray or go outside.
- **Over-grooming** – around the perineum because of the pain and irritation in the bladder and urethra. This can cause hair loss in that area.
- **Behavioural changes** – such as loss of litter tray training, aggression or irritation.
- **Stranguria** – blockage to the urethra. The cat will strain to try to pass urine but will be unable to. This is seen mainly in male cats, as their urethras are longer and narrower than in female cats, and so more likely to become blocked.

Spraying:

- This is a normal territorial and marking behaviour in all entire and neutered males and females, and only becomes a problem when it occurs indoors.
- It occurs against a vertical surface and the cat adopts the classical stance with upright and quivering tail to deposit a small volume of urine.
- Spraying within the core territory is a sign of anxiety or conflict and in some cases may even be the only presenting sign of FLUTD.
- It is essential to perform a clinical examination and urinalysis of all cats presenting with spraying indoors or inappropriate urination.

Having ruled out medical causes of spraying behaviour, the problem may be addressed by:

1. Identifying and removing the source of conflict where possible
2. Avoiding punishment
3. Optimising the environment as detailed in 'Optimising the environment to reduce feline anxiety'
4. Preventative measures e.g. tin foil or plastic sheeting on the area being sprayed
5. Use of appropriate enzymatic cleaning products
6. Pheromone therapy or nutraceuticals

Urination problems:

- Inappropriate urination occurs within the cats' core territory, out with the litter tray and involves the cat adopting a normal squatting position to void its' bladder.
- Once again it is essential to rule out medical causes for this problem which include FLUTD, arthritis (unable to access tray/adopt normal position), cognitive dysfunction, seizures, pododermatitis and conditions that cause an increase in thirst (diabetes, acromegaly and hyperthyroidism).
- It should be noted that while FLUTD often presents as a medical problem, the underlying cause is often stress. **Thus all cases of FLUTD should receive behavioural as well as medical intervention.**
- This should take the form of questioning the owner in detail about all aspects of the cats' environment, potential stressors and the provision of key resources.

Middening:

- Visually similar to defecation however the cat does not dig a hole prior to defecation, cover the faeces or sniff the area after defecation as would be usual for a cat passing faeces in regular circumstances.
- May occur alone or in combination with inappropriate urination. Medical problems such as diarrhoea, constipation, arthritis, seizures, hyperthyroidism and cognitive dysfunction should be ruled out.

Having rules out medical problems for inappropriate urination and/or defaecation:

1. Environmental differentials should be considered.
2. These include ruling out a problem with the litter tray (type, position, competition, negative association, substrate type, substrate depth, cleanliness).
3. It is also important to look at potential stressors within the cats' environment and remove these where possible.
4. It is essential that the owner does not punish the cat as this will only lead to an increase in anxiety and worsening of the problem.
5. The core territory should be optimised as discussed in 'Optimising the environment to reduce feline anxiety' and pheromone therapy and nutraceuticals used as appropriate.