

# Inappropriate Elimination

- Inappropriate elimination refers to any episodes of urination or defecation outside of the areas where the pet has been trained to go.
- Although a behavior problem can cause inappropriate elimination, medical issues should always be investigated first.
- If the problem is medical, treatment depends on the underlying cause. Behavioral problems may resolve with improved training, stress management, and/or anti-anxiety medications. Punishment should never be part of the treatment plan.

### What Is Inappropriate Elimination?

When most of us think about inappropriate elimination, we probably picture a male cat “spraying” or a male dog using urine to mark territory. But inappropriate elimination can also be displayed by females, and it doesn’t always involve urine—it may involve depositing feces 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 feces 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 neighborhood tomcats wandering through the yard. Although this is a normal behavior in cats, most owners consider it unacceptable when it occurs in the house—that’s what makes it “inappropriate.” 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 behavioral “problem,” but it is perceived as inappropriate by the owner and can quickly become a nuisance.

Sometimes, inappropriate elimination does indicate an actual behavioral or emotional problem—hormones

may be involved, as well as stress or anxiety. Despite popular myth, pets are not being “spiteful” when they eliminate inappropriately. 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 behavior.

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

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### What Medical Problems Can Cause Inappropriate Elimination?

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

- **Diabetes and kidney disease:** In dogs and cats, both of these diseases cause increased drinking and urination. This can cause some pets to have urinary accidents in the house.
- **Thyroid disease in cats; Cushing’s 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.
- **Diarrhea:** This can cause fecal accidents in dogs and cats.
- **Cognitive dysfunction syndrome:** This is a type of dementia that can occur in aging dogs

and cats. Some pets with this condition seem to forget their house-training and can have urinary and fecal accidents in the house.

- **Seizures:** Pets can urinate or defecate while having a seizure. If you did not witness the episode, you may come home and find urine or feces 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 feces (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 defecation may develop an aversion to the litterbox and prefer to defecate in other areas.

### What Behavioral Problems Can Cause Inappropriate Elimination?

Even though a long list of medical conditions can cause inappropriate elimination, behavioral factors, including the following, can also be involved:

- **Litterbox aversion in cats:** A cat may have this problem because the litterbox is not clean enough or is in an unfavorable location. Or a cat may not like the type of litter or 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 Is the Problem Diagnosed?

Owner observation and medical history are very important for diagnosing the cause of inappropriate

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

- **Urinalysis**
- **Fecal 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 veterinarian may recommend more specific tests to screen for Cushing's disease in dogs, thyroid disease in cats, or other medical problems.

## Behavior and Training

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

### How Is the Problem Treated?

If the problem is medical, treatment should target the underlying condition. For behavioral issues, there are many ways to approach treatment. Punishment, however, 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 be an effective way to eliminate the problem. It is also helpful to use odor-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 veterinarian in spray or plug-in diffuser forms. These products have a calming effect on many pets.

To discourage neighborhood 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 veterinarian if anti-anxiety medications may be appropriate for your pet.

For dogs with submissive urination, positive reinforcement training and behavior 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 veterinarian right away is the best way to solve the problem before your patience runs out.