Curing the Litter Box Blues: Feline Elimination Disorders

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Agenda

• General information
• Inappropriate elimination vs. urine marking
• Causes
• Resolving feline behavior problems
• Diagnosis and treatment
• Shelter program

General Information

• Definition of “elimination disorder”
  • Do not use litter box for urination and/or defecation

• Prevalence ➔ Widespread
  • THE most common behavioral problem of cats
  • 40 – 75% of all cats presented with behavior problems

• Impact on human-animal bond
  • Can strain the relationship to the breaking point

• Can almost always be managed and resolved!
Inappropriate Elimination vs. Urine Marking

Inappropriate elimination
- Only horizontal surfaces
- Deposit large amounts
- Squatting posture
- May eliminate both inside and outside litter box
- May use box for urination or defecation only

Urine marking
- Mostly vertical surfaces
- Deposit small amounts
- Display a typical posture
- Normal behavior

Causes
- Several factors may be involved
- What is initiated by one factor may continued by another
- Two general behavioral categories:
  1. Dislike of the litter box
  2. Stress-related misbehavior
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Causes — Examples

- Medical problem(s) (e.g., urinary tract infection)
- Infrequent cleaning
- Substrate aversion
- Litter box location
- Residual odor in inappropriate areas
- Negative association(s) with litter box
- Change of residents in the house (two and four-legged)
- Change in home and/or furnishings
- Change in daily routine
- Outdoor stressors

Resolving Feline Behavior Problems

- Cause ⇒ Artificial social situations
- Involves the slow reshaping of the cat’s natural behaviors
- To solve the problem, must understand the problem
- MUST rule out physical problems first

Diagnosis and Treatment

- Behavioral history
- Medical/Physiological problems
- Environmental changes
  - Attraction therapy
  - Aversion therapy
- Behavioral modification
  - Shaping the cats behavior
- Behavioral products
- Behavioral pharmacology
**Behavioral History**

- Thorough behavioral history
  - Essential to a successful diagnosis and behavioral therapy program

- Include the following information:
  - Amount of time spent outside
  - Outdoor stressors?
  - Brand and type of litter used
  - Number and location of litter boxes
  - Style of litter boxes
  - Covers and liners used?
  - Frequency of scooping and cleaning
  - Areas and surfaces that are soiled
  - Products used to clean litter box and soiled areas
  - History of urinary tract problems?

- Have client complete questionnaire prior to appointment

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**Medical/Physiological Problems**

- Minimal database for inappropriate urination/urine marking
  - Physical exam
  - Determination of neuter status
  - Urinalysis via cystocentesis
  - +/- urine culture, abdominal radiographs

- Minimal database for inappropriate defecation
  - Physical exam (including a rectal exam)
  - Determination of neuter status
  - Fecal exam (floatation and smear)
  - +/- Expressing of anal sacs and cytological evaluation of contents

- Other tests may be warranted (e.g., Blood Glucose, BUN, Creatinine, thyroid level)

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**Medical/Physiological Problems**

- Check neuter status

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Medical/Physiological Problems

- Spay/Neuter unaltered pets!
  - 90% of male cats no longer mark after neutering
  - 95% of female cats no longer mark after spaying

Even when a physical diagnosis is made, behavioral therapy may be needed in addition to medical treatment since behavioral problems can arise as a result of negative conditioning.

Environmental Changes

Attraction Therapy: Making Litter Box More Attractive – Encourages Cat

- Scoop out litter boxes daily
- Clean litter boxes on a regular schedule
- Try a variety of litter box styles and sizes – larger the better
- Provide at least one litter box per cat (may share)
- Provide at least one litter box for every level of the house
- Place litter boxes in private accessible locations
- Remove litter box covers and liners
- Use unscented litter; clumping preferred
- Purchase new litter box(s)
- Move food and water bowls away from the litter box sites
- Offer a variety of litter depths in different litter boxes
Environmental Changes
Attraction Therapy

- Scoop out litter boxes daily!

- Clean litter boxes on a regular schedule

- Try a variety of litter box styles and sizes
  - The larger the better
**Environmental Changes**

**Attraction Therapy**

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- Provide at least one litter box for every level of the house
- Place litter boxes in private accessible locations

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**Environmental Changes**

**Attraction Therapy**

- Remove litter box covers and liners

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**Environmental Changes**

**Attraction Therapy**

- Use unscented litter; clumping preferred
Environmental Changes
Attraction Therapy

• Purchase new litter box(s)

Environmental Changes
Attraction Therapy

• Move food and water bowls away from the litter box sites

Environmental Changes
Attraction Therapy

• Offer a variety of litter depths in different litter boxes
Environmental Changes
Aversion Therapy:
Making Unsuitable Sites Undesirable – Discourages Cat

• Place deterrents at the soiled area site(s)
• Clean soiled areas with a cleaner that is specifically formulated to break down (neutralize) urine and/or stool
• If possible, make area being soiled inaccessible
Environmental Changes
Aversion Therapy

- If possible, make area being soiled inaccessible

Behavioral Modification
Shaping the Cat’s Behavior

- Take cat to the litter box frequently ⇒ praise use
- Do not use physical punishment
- Temporarily place a litter box over the soiled area(s)
- Avoid, eliminate, or at least reduce awareness of outdoor stressors
- If caught in the act ⇒ interrupt and redirect
- Multi-cat household ⇒ create an “atmosphere of plenty”
- Confine cat to a small area
- Keep a behavioral diary
- For inappropriate defecation, feed the cat twice a day

Behavioral Products

- Feliway® Pheromone Spray and Diffuser
- Cat Attract™ Litter or Cat Attract™ Litter Additive
Behavioral Pharmacology

- Only an adjunct to treatment plan
- Usually more successful for motivated behavior (e.g., urine spraying) and stressed animals
- No drugs approved by the FDA for the treatment of inappropriate elimination
- Many psychotropic drugs have human abuse potential

**Behavioral Pharmacology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug Class</th>
<th>Drug Name</th>
<th>Dose for Cats (PO)</th>
<th>Side Effects</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antidepressive</td>
<td>Buspirone (BuSpar)</td>
<td>0.5 – 1.0 mg/kg</td>
<td>Sedation, irritability, alterations in social behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antidepressive</td>
<td>Alprazolam (Xanax)</td>
<td>0.125 – 0.25 mg/cat</td>
<td>Sedation, idiopathic hepatic necrosis (?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Antidepressive</td>
<td>Diazepam (Valium)</td>
<td>0.2 – 0.5 mg/kg</td>
<td>Sedation, idiopathic hepatic necrosis (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antidepressive</td>
<td>Fluoxetine (Prozac)</td>
<td>0.5 – 1.0 mg/kg</td>
<td>Sleep disturbances, irritability, anorexia, changes in elimination patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antidepressive</td>
<td>Paroxetine (Paxil)</td>
<td>0.5 – 1.0 mg/kg</td>
<td>Sleep disturbances, irritability, anorexia, changes in elimination patterns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antidepressive</td>
<td>Amitriptyline (Elavil)</td>
<td>0.5 – 1.0 mg/kg</td>
<td>Sedation, anticholinergic effects, cardiac conduction disturbances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antidepressive</td>
<td>Clomipramine (Anafranil)</td>
<td>0.3 – 0.5 mg/kg</td>
<td>Sedation, anticholinergic effects, cardiac conduction disturbances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Shelter Program**

- Identifying litter box problems in the shelter
- Medical/Physiological problems
- Treatment — how?
  - Environmental changes
    - Attraction therapy
    - Aversion therapy
  - Behavioral modification
    - Shaping the cats behavior
    - Behavioral products
    - Behavioral pharmacology
  - Placement
Identifying Litter Box Problems in the Shelter

- Intake questionnaire
  - Include questions about history of litter box use
  - Can be used as a screening tool
  - Example:
    - Cat Intake Profile from Animal Rescue League of Boston
      http://www.arlboston.org
- Intake interview
  - Opportunity to develop rapport
  - Questions are not "blaming" - Help manage the cat

Identifying Litter Box Problems in the Shelter

- Observation of enclosure behavior
  - Litter box "misuse" often not demonstrated

Medical/Physiological Problems

Shelter Environment

- Minimal database for inappropriate urination/urine marking
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- Other tests may be warranted (e.g., Blood Glucose, BUN, Creatinine, thyroid level)
Treatment – Foster Care

• Strongly recommended
• Keep cat in one room
• Monitor and record elimination (in and out of box)
• Follow cleaning and environmental recommendations
• If no problems after two weeks, gradually allow access to rest of home
  • Continue to monitor
• If no problems after additional two weeks, put up for adoption

Treatment – In Shelter

• Keep in “real life” room or large cat condo
• Monitor and record elimination (in and out of box)
• Follow cleaning and environmental recommendations

Treatment

Remember, lack of a problem in a shelter (or foster care) does not guarantee that the problem would not happen in an adoptive home

The Good News!
Following standard recommendations usually prevents recurrence

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Placement

• Ideal home:
  • Single cat household
  • Minimal outdoor activity/stressors
  • Quite household
  • Adopter willing and able to follow standard litter box environmental recommendations

   MOST IMPORTANT

Adoption Counseling

• Full disclosure regarding cat’s history
• Offer “foster to adopt” as an option
• Education! Education! Education!
• Follow-up

Questions?