Protocol for Cats with Elimination Disorders

The steps described below are designed to help resolve substrate (litter) and location preferences and aversions that are commonly experienced by cats. These steps are intended to help reinforce a cat's appropriate litter box use. Remember that the feline social system may also affect the behavior of a cat that is not using the litter box. Note any interactions with other cats, pets, or people that might be compounding the problem.

1. All affected areas in the house that have been urinated or defecated on should be cleaned thoroughly with an effective enzymatic odor eliminator which breaks down the urine or fecal material. An excellent odor eliminator is called Nature's Miracle and can be found at most large pet stores.

2. After cleaning and drying, cover affected areas with heavy-gauge plastic both to change the tactile sensation for the cat and to prevent further penetration of stool or urine in the event of elimination.

3. Use multiple litter boxes, generally one more than there are cats. These litter boxes should be placed in a variety of locations and be of a variety of styles (open, covered, deep, shallow, big).

4. Litter should be scooped DAILY, and most litter boxes should be dumped weekly, then washed and refilled with fresh litter. Some old litter boxes may be so permeated with scent that they should be discarded and replaced with new litter boxes.

5. A variety of litters should be offered to the cat in a variety of boxes. Different litters include clumping clay-based cat litter, non-clumping clay-based cat litter, playground sand, shredded newspaper, sawdust, wood chips (NOT cedar), recycled newspaper litter. Be creative and persistent.

6. Cats are not trained to litter boxes; this is a behavior that develops in the absence of human intervention as kittens. Accordingly, a cat with an elimination problem cannot be trained to use a litter box. However, a cat can be encouraged to use a specific substrate by taking the cat to the litter box frequently, waiting with it, and praising it whenever it uses the box.

7. If the cat is observed squatting outside the box, punishment works if the cat is startled within the first 30 to 60 seconds of the onset of the behavior and the startle is sufficient to make the cat abort the behavior and leave. Water spray bottles, whistles, and shaking tins of pennies all work with some cats. Do NOT use physical punishment with any pet. Physical punishment, including rubbing the cat's nose in the soiled area, is useless and potentially dangerous to the client and injurious to the cat.

8. Some cats may need to be confined to a restricted area at first. If you do this, make sure that the cat has the same choice of litters and boxes mentioned previously and that you give much attention to the cat during its confinement. If the behavior of any other cats in the household changes when one is isolated, this hints at a social problem that may need to be addressed as part of the treatment for the elimination disorder. Access to the rest of the house can be expanded once the cats are using litter appropriately in the confined area. It is important that the expanded access be closely supervised because of the potential for relapses.

9. Anti-anxiety medications may help some cats that otherwise are unable to succeed in this
program. Remember, if it is decided that medication could benefit your cat, you need to use it in addition to the behavior modifications mentioned above, not instead of them.


Checklist:

- Scoop litter boxes daily
- Dump litter at least once weekly
- Wash the litter box in hot, soapy water once weekly. Do not use ammonia products and make sure that the box is well rinsed and dried
- Clean soiled areas with an appropriate odor eliminator, repeat and cover with plastic to prevent re-soiling
- Take the cat to the litter box often.
- Provide one more litter box than the number of cats in the household
- Try many litter types, depths, and box sizes
- Place a scent deterrent in the area where the cat is eliminating inappropriately (mint or deodorant-scented soap works well)
- Try litter boxes with and without liners
- Try covered and opened boxes
- Try different depths of litter, including no litter