

We occasionally encounter this problem with pet cats and although it is not a great problem medically it is certainly a serious one socially!

The first thing to determine is that there is no disease present that might explain the problem. Cystitis might cause a cat to pass urine in the wrong place, as might diseases that increase urine production such as diabetes. Colitis might cause an urgent need to defaecate. Careful questioning about your cat's habits and perhaps a few laboratory tests should exclude these possibilities. Once it is determined that there is no pathological cause for inappropriate soiling a regime to modify the behaviour can be started.

It should be made clear from the outset that it is normal for tom cats (i.e., males not neutered) to spray urine. They are marking territory and are unlikely to stop until they are neutered. Most vets prefer to neuter male cats of between 6 and 9 months -- before they reach puberty and begin this behaviour. It is not always clear why the odd female or neutered male cat starts to urinate indoors, especially when they have been OK previously. Sometimes a "trigger" factor is identified such as the arrival of a new pet in the neighbourhood, a new baby in the house or the absence of the family for holidays. Some highly bred cats such as certain lines of Persian are perhaps more likely to be sensitive to such triggers. Other times there is no apparent reason for the behaviour.

The behaviour is self-reinforcing, i.e., the more it happens the stronger the stimulus for repetition and it is important to act quickly with preventive measures. Therapy begins by identifying the areas in the house where your pet does not soil -- usually there are some. The offending cat is kept confined there. I suggest a small (1m²) enclosed zone to begin with. Sharing this area should be a litter tray, food and water bowl and a small bed. Clearly there is now little room for the cat to soil outside the tray. Very few cats will contaminate their feeding and sleeping areas and the litter tray is the now the easiest place to go. Your pet must be released from this area only under supervision and it is vital that she never manages to soil in the wrong place without immediate discovery and removal to the litter tray. "Immediate" means just that. It is no use finding a soiled patch of carpet or bed two minutes after the event and then responding -- this will not be understood and will only serve to confuse. A cat will see no point in being placed in a litter tray after it has relieved itself. Use of lower residue foods (e.g. lam's chicken, dry) will reduce the frequency of soiling and make training somewhat easier -- provided no other foods are given.

During the period of confinement the previously soiled areas of the house should be thoroughly cleansed to remove all traces of scent as the presence of urine or faecal odours stimulates the cat to soil the area again. Disinfectants are not necessary and while they mask smells to humans they will not fool the much more sensitive nose of the cat. Disinfectants also inhibit the action of special microbiological products designed to get rid of odours (e.g., "Odour Eliminator")

At least initially, the litter tray should be cleaned whenever it is soiled which will mean several times per day. After 7 days or once your pet is regularly using the tray (whichever is the longer period) she can be given a gradually increasing area but still released only under close scrutiny. This strict regime continues for several weeks until the cat has forgotten all about soiling anywhere but her tray, which is kept scrupulously clean. The regime is time consuming and demands much from owners but most succeed if they have the time to devote. Only a small number of cases remain resistant to treatment.

Success rates are increased with the concomitant use of medical therapy. Certain progestagens are useful, as are valium and amitriptyline. Buspirone, for use in this context. Results appear encouraging and although buspirone, like all medicines, has side-effects (slightly more aggression towards other cats and more affection towards people) these are probably preferable to the side-effects of the other medicines.