

## HOUSE SOILING & FURNITURE SCRATCHING

### PART 1 - CANINE INAPPROPRIATE ELIMINATION

#### **What this lecture will cover:**

Canine inappropriate elimination refers to the unseemly practice of dogs urinating/defecating on the floor or on furniture inside an owner's home. The umbrella term "inappropriate elimination" typically includes elimination that results from: 1) a lack of, or a disruption in, housetraining, 2) urine marking, 3) submissive urination, 4) excitement urination, and 5) separation anxiety. Of course, medical problems can also contribute; however, this lecture will concentrate on a lack of, or disruption in, housetraining and urine marking. Inappropriate elimination due to separation anxiety, submissive/excitement urination, canine cognitive dysfunction, or a medical cause will be covered in other lectures.

#### **Why you should know this information: IT CAN SAVE LIVES!**

Canine inappropriate elimination made up 9% of canine cases at Cornell University's Animal Behavior Clinic between 1987 and 1996 (this includes dogs that inappropriately eliminate due to separation anxiety) and 11% in a review of case referrals to various behaviorists. So while this behavior problem isn't the most frequently encountered problem by behaviorists and specialty veterinarians, it has been cited by numerous studies **as one of the most common reasons for canine relinquishment**. Interestingly, one study found that only 20% of veterinarians surveyed reported confidence in their ability to treat canine inappropriate elimination. It's important for veterinarians to know and share with new dog owners the basics of housetraining because prevention can often be the best medicine. It's also important for veterinarians to ask owners how the housetraining process is proceeding so that timely intervention (through referral if necessary) can be taken if it is not going well. While veterinarians are often pressed for time during appointments, this simple act could save a dog from shelter relinquishment and possible euthanasia.

### Causes & Treatments for Canine Housesoiling

The first consideration when attempting to address such a problem is to determine the reason for this behavior:

#### **1.) Medical Causes**

It is important to perform a thorough physical examination to rule out underlying medical conditions that might be contributing to inappropriate elimination (see section on medical causes of behavior problems). This is particularly important for dogs that have had a sudden breakdown of house training, are older, or appear to be leaking urine.

#### **2.) Failure to Housetrain or Disruption in Housetraining**

Some owners acquire dogs that are not properly housetrained. Certainly house soiling is par

for the course for very young puppies. Other dogs that were never properly house trained will occasionally have accidents in the home into their adult years. Some formerly housetrained dogs will suffer a breakdown in housetraining caused by a change in their owner's schedule or a move. Diagnosing a "disruption or failure to housetrain" case requires some detective work in terms of assessing whether the dog was ever successfully housetrained and ruling out other behavioral conditions of which inappropriate elimination is a feature (see above). Housetrained dogs typically indicate their desire to eliminate outdoors by vocalizing, approaching a doorway or ringing a bell, though some housetrained dogs never indicate this need because they are provided free access or very frequent access to the outdoors.

Some owners do not understand that they have to **teach** their dogs to eliminate outside. Dogs are not born knowing that elimination should occur outside of an owner's home. A preference for elimination that occurs outdoors and on particular surfaces must be cultivated. Puppies as young as 8 weeks old can form preferences for elimination surfaces; therefore, housetraining should not be put off.

Once a diagnosis of disruption/lack of housetraining is established, a re-housetraining program is in order. It is best for an owner to start the training program when he/she will be home over a weekend or on a week's vacation so that undivided attention can be given to the process of rewarding successful eliminations and avoiding accidents (see below).

Most dogs can be housetrained as adults, though some take longer than others. The prognosis for successful housetraining decreases if a dog was not kept in sanitary conditions as a pup, or if it has been allowed to eliminate in the house for many years. The prognosis can also be poor for a dog that is unable to be isolated or contained without displaying anxiety or barrier frustration. The Animal Behavior Clinic at Cornell reports an overall success rate of 84% for treating inappropriate elimination problems using similar methodologies to ours. Also, a recent shelter study found that when behavioral counseling concerning housetraining was given to adopters of non-housetrained dogs, the success rate for housetraining was 98%.

Are certain breeds more difficult to housetrain than others? No scientific studies have been done to answer this question. There is speculation that some breeds are harder to housetrain. For instance, it has been said that inbreeding has caused a loss of the drive to defecate in one spot (Cocker Spaniels, Maltese, Terriers, and Dachshunds). At the Cornell Behavior Clinic, Cockers, Beagles, and Shih Tzus were the most common purebreds seen for inappropriate elimination, though mixed breeds made up more of their caseload for inappropriate elimination than purebreds. It has been theorized that Beagles are hard to housetrain because they scent any previously soiled area and return to it. Owners of small dogs may be more likely to put up with the small-sized accidents their pooches produce and put off or give up more easily on housetraining.

## Treatment for a Non-Housetrained Dog

- ***It is a good idea to put the dog on a regular schedule of feeding and exercise.*** Water should, of course, be provided at all times (water restriction isn't required to housetrain). Meal feeding a dog will make the timing of elimination more predictable for owners. Generally, dogs will defecate 20-30 minutes after a meal, so owners can use this knowledge in deciding when to take their dogs outside to eliminate. Having owners make a log of when their dog happens to eliminate can help them learn more about their dog's individual elimination habits.
- ***The basis of the retraining program is to direct the dog to a selected toilet area outside the house.*** The former is accomplished by escorting the dog from the house on a lead to the chosen bathroom area and keeping her moving (walking her up and down) while using certain cue words such as "Go Potty" or "Do your duty". Pre-elimination behaviors that owners should look for include sniffing, circling, and walking "straddle legged." It is important that this rigmarole take place in one selected area only so that the dog becomes visually and olfactorily attuned to the significance of the place. If the operation is a success, and the dog produces either urine or feces, the correct owner response is one of joy and exhilaration, with exuberant praise and the instantaneous delivery of a highly rewarding food item (e.g., freeze dried liver treat or a piece of cheese). The owner must take food treats outside with him so the reward can be given immediately. If the owner waits until he walks back into the house to deliver a food reward, the dog could conclude that it gets rewarded for coming back into the house and not for an appropriate elimination. Appropriately timed rewards will reinforce the desired location and substrate for elimination (e.g., grass, dirt). The idea is that a dog should want to hold her urine and feces in order for the privilege of being taken outside to produce the goods and earn the reward.

Eventually, the food rewards can be given intermittently and then phased out. If a mission is unsuccessful after five minutes or so (i.e., dog doesn't eliminate), the dog should be brought back into the house and confined to prevent any in-home accidents (see next section). The owner should wait 15-20 minutes and then try again, repeating this sequence of events until a "successful elimination" takes place. Then the dog must be supervised appropriately until she is ready for another bathroom break. Specific times that are important to take a dog out for a bathroom break include first thing in the morning, around noon, late afternoon, and in the evening, plus secondary excursions after a meal, after playing, or when the dog wakes up from a rest. Puppies of course need to be taken out more often. How long can a puppy "hold it" for? It has been said that a puppy can "hold it" for  $x$  hours, where  $x = \text{its age in months} + 1$  (i.e., a 4-month-old pup can hold it for 5 hours). When awake and active, a puppy may need to eliminate every 2 hours but can hold it for many hours while asleep. A healthy adult dog can "hold it" for 8-10 hours. Owners may need to employ the help of family, friends, neighbors, dog walkers, or pet sitters for help in getting their dogs or puppies out often enough and to avoid accidents in the home.

- Prevent inappropriate elimination within the home. This must be done along with the housetraining protocol above. Confinement can be by means of a crate, provided the dog is comfortable inside one and does not normally soil inside it. Alternatively, tying the dog to the owner's belt (umbilical cord training) or securing her within a confined area by means of a lead attached to a fixture in the house, behind a baby gate in a recess, or in a small exercise pen (a.k.a., X pen) will also suffice. The concept here is to make sure that if the dog does manage to defecate/urinate in the house, it will be unable to escape from the mess. Most self-respecting dogs will hold urine and feces for hours to avoid the possibility of such personal contamination. The surface of the containment area is important. Dogs are less likely to eliminate on non-absorbent surfaces. After 15 minutes of confinement, the dog can be taken out again to the same spot in the yard and encouraged to urinate or defecate once more using the method described above. This process is repeated until met with success. If an owner must leave the dog for longer hours, and the dog won't hold it until the owner returns, use of a doggy door could be employed or piddle pads. If a patient does routinely eliminate in her crate or on non-absorbent surfaces, this creates an obstacle in treatment. A healthy dog that cannot make it through the night is also problematic in terms of treatment. The goal is for the owner to avoid ALL indoor accidents while rewarding outdoor eliminations. If an owner can't avoid all indoor accidents, then they should still be encouraged to engage in the program, rewarding as many outdoor eliminations events as possible while attempting to avert as many indoor accidents as possible.
  
- If the program is working well and the dog learns quickly that the bathroom is outside, **it should not be allowed unlimited access to the house until it can be deemed truly trustworthy.** The way to ensure this is to keep the dog in a section of the house in which it is unlikely to eliminate, perhaps the kitchen, so that it can be observed even after the successful completion of an outside excursion. In the event that the dog starts to sniff the ground and circle suspiciously, as if about to soil in the house, a loud noise as a distraction could be made that is sufficient to tighten down all the dog's sphincters and arrest the activity, followed by taking the dog outside and praised for using the desired facility. If success is had in avoiding indoor accidents and rewarding appropriate eliminations for a couple of months, the dog can be gradually given more and more spatial freedom within the house. Some small dogs can never be given the full run of a large house because areas that are a good distance from the main living quarters (less frequently used parts of the house) will be deemed far enough away from their main territory to be used as a bathroom. To solve this problem, one could try to change the dog's perception of less commonly used areas of the house by playing or feeding her in those areas.
  
- Some owners ask if use of piddle pads or paper training is appropriate when housetraining dogs/puppies. Piddle pads may be used temporarily to make cleaning up easier for the owner, or if the dog must be left longer than it can "hold it", but reliance on them for too long may ultimately make housetraining more confusing for the dog. Also, use of piddle pads seems to encourage owners to put housetraining off longer than they should. However, say you have an owner of a small dog who lives in a high rise apartment and doesn't expect his dog to be housetrained, piddle pads or a doggy litter box may be an

acceptable alternative. Use of waist bands (a.k.a., belly bands) on male dogs is not recommended for long periods of time because they keep spent urine close to the skin. However, some dogs will refrain from urinating when wearing one because of the discomfort they may feel if they do urinate. Thus, the bands could be used as a short-term avoidance tool.

- Proper Cleanup: In addition to the above retraining, it is vitally important for the owner to thoroughly clean all soiled areas with a professional odor neutralizer. Options for appropriate cleaners include Zero Odor, Anti-icky-Poo, Nature's Miracle, and OxiClean. Some of these products have a short shelf life and so must be fresh in order to be effective. They should be used in accordance with manufacturer's directions. For enzymatic products, the area should be soaked for a sufficient time to allow the enzymes to work (e.g., Nature's Miracles). Covering the area with a dishcloth soaked in the solution can help delay evaporation and prolong the action of the enzymes. Smooth surfaces, like linoleum floors, can be easier to clean than carpets since the material under the carpet might have to be treated as well. Owners should not clean with vinegar or ammonia, which may smell like urine to a dog. If the slightest trace of odor remains, the dog is likely to be attracted back to that same area to eliminate again. Odor cues are that significant to a dog. A black light can be used to detect whether any urine traces (urine will glow under black light) were left behind after a spot treatment.
- Under no circumstances should a dog be punished for soiling in the house. Owners should not yell at their dog, hit their dog, or rub her face in the mess. Some owners believe their dogs are eliminating in the house out of spite (e.g., because they've been left home alone). It must be made clear to the owner that the dog is not likely to be eliminating in the house out of spite. Most likely, the dog simply does not know that eliminating inside of the house is not acceptable. If a dog is punished minutes or hours after the elimination, even in view of the elimination spot, it will not connect an owner's reaction to its accident. Punishment is only effective if delivered as the unwanted behavior is occurring or within seconds after it has stopped. However, we don't recommend owners use punishment at all because it can be easily associated with an owner, if not carried out remotely, and will carry over to the outside excursions, making the dog frightened to produce the goods in the owner's presence (complicating the retraining process). Dogs can also learn to avoid eliminating in front of their owners if they are punished for it. In one study, 43% of people relinquishing a dog either weren't sure or thought it was helpful to rub the dog's nose in its mess when it soils in the house. Obviously, owners need to be educated about the misuse of punishment in housetraining, and this is a need veterinarians can help fulfill. Here's another myth that veterinarians can help undo. Owners often report, "My dog knows it has done wrong after it has eliminated in the house because he/she acts/looks guilty when I yell at him/her for it." Whether a dog is capable of feeling guilt is not known for sure. It's likely that the behavioral signs of guilt are misinterpreted by the owner and are really signs of appeasement or submission in response to owners' threatening body postures i.e. yelling, pointing, or other various forms of punishment. Even a dirty look or sigh of frustration could be threatening from the sensitive dog's perspective. If an owner gets into the habit of punishing his dog for

inappropriate eliminations that occurred in his absence, the dog can come to associate the owner's arrival with punishment and exhibit submissive body postures before the owner even finds the soiled area!

- If the above program is engaged with a religious fervor for several weeks/months, many dogs will respond positively. Owners should be encouraged by a dog that begins to show behavioral signs that it wants to be let it outside for elimination, such as scratching, barking, or whining in a doorway. For dogs that don't show such signs, owners can try teaching their dogs to ring a bell to signify that she wants to go outside. Responding appropriately to a "Go Potty!" command is another positive sign that the training is working. Accidents can occur in response to loosening of the confinement/avoidance tactics. Retightening the confinement rules can get the dog back on track. After a period of successful housetraining, an owner could interpret an accident as a sign that the dog is purposefully urinating in the house as a form of urine marking, when in reality the dog is not yet 100% reliably housetrained.

**Common Housetraining Pitfalls** (Kathy Diamond Davis via [www.vin.com](http://www.vin.com))

- Leaving a not-yet-housetrained dog loose in the house without staying in the same room and watching the dog.
- Punishing in housetraining; for some dogs, scolding—even a dirty look from you—is enough to throw housetraining off track.
- Not taking the dog out often enough.
- Not treating accident spots with the right type of product.
- Adopting a dog that lacks the physical ability to meet the housetraining conditions you want.
- Postponing housetraining for a more convenient time.
- Failing to give a young puppy experience eliminating on the surfaces you will want the dog to use later.
- Continuing an indoor method for too long if reliability about not soiling the house is your goal.
- Feeding problems including leaving food out all the time, feeding a high-fiber dog food, and giving treats that throw the dog's body off track.
- Not getting the dog medical care for orthopedic, parasitic, stress diarrhea, anxiety disorders, or other physical problems.
- Crating for too many hours, either regularly or even in some cases just once.
- Expecting the dog to ask to go out.
- Housetraining two dogs at once.
- Keeping two tiny or small male dogs together who become "dueling tinklers", and then blaming the dogs.
- Expecting a dog to actually understand housetraining.
- Taking housetraining accidents as personal insults toward you from the dog.
- Thinking the dog is doing it out of spite.
- Thinking the dog feels guilty because of dog body language that is actually submissiveness.

### 3.) **Urine & Fecal Marking Behavior**

Dogs, like many other species, use urine and feces as a method of communication—a signal that—like handwriting in human beings—persists long after the sender has gone. Urine marking is often discussed in the context of its relationship to territory. Dogs do not limit their marking behavior to their territorial boundaries, and scent marking does not keep non-residents out of territories. Rather, scent marking may provide intruders with a way of identifying and assessing the residents of the area. Scent marking may also be used to help an animal remember or orient themselves within an area.

Scent marking also provides information about sexual status and may help individuals identify another sexually ready individual. Estrous females urinate more often than anestrous females and spend more time investigating the urine of intact males. Male dogs spend more time investigating the urine of estrous females than of anestrous females or urine of other male dogs. Both male and female dogs engage in urine marking. One study found that sixty percent of female canine urinations were strategically directed, in both spayed and non-spayed females. Females older than 4 years were more likely to direct their urine.

Diagnosing a urine marking problem in dogs involves evaluating the context(s) in which the urinations occur and the volume of urine expressed. Some situations that trigger urine marking include a nearby estrous female, emotionally arousing situations (as a displacement behavior), and new objects in the home. Sometimes a diagnosis can be made in response to treatment. Although relatively rare, some dogs leave their mark using feces as the vehicle. Again, it is the strategic location and context in which it occurs that differentiates it from a simple housetraining problem.

#### **Treatment for Urine Marking:**

A. In one study, neutering male dogs >2 years of age resulted in:

- ≥ 90% improvement in urine marking in 25 to 40% of dogs
- ≥ 50% improvement in urine marking in 60% of dogs

In this study, age at castration and duration of the problem were not significantly correlated with improvement. We typically tell owners that improvement could occur for up to 6 months after castration. Neutering has no effect on urine marking for some dogs, which suggests social and learning factors are involved.

B. The behavioral solutions to urine marking in neutered males and females include:

- Determine whether it's anxiety-related and address the anxiety (e.g., sibling rivalry)
- Increase owner's leadership status via the *Nothing in Life is Free* program (see Lecture

Notes on Canine Aggression).

- C. Other treatments for urine marking are those same treatments recommended for housesoiling:
- Proper clean-up (see above).
  - Prevention of urine marking within the house via management (see above) and avoidance of triggers (e.g., another dog visits the home).
- D. Drug treatments may help. Prozac may make a dog less likely to participate in anxiety-related urine marking.

## PART 2 - FELINE LITTERBOX AVERSION

### **What This Lecture Will Cover:**

Inappropriate elimination that is caused by a litter box aversion or because the cat has developed an alternate substrate preference is often referred to as a “litter box problem”. This lecture will cover inappropriate elimination that results from a “litter box problem”.

### **Why You Should Know This Information: IT CAN SAVE LIVES!**

Feline inappropriate elimination made up 56% of feline cases at Cornell University’s Animal Behavior Clinic between 1991 and 2001, and it appears to be the most frequent type of feline behavior problem we see at Tufts Behavior Clinic, closely followed by aggression. Successfully treating feline inappropriate elimination can prevent these cats from being relinquished to shelters. The National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy reported that housesoiling was the 7th most common reason for shelter relinquishment. Of those owners who reported a behavioral reason for relinquishment, housesoiling was the top reason and accounted for 43% of the cats relinquished for a behavioral problem. Again, veterinarians did not score highly in a self-report study on their confidence in their ability to treat this problem, with only 28% of vets reporting that they felt confident about it. This lecture and course will hopefully provide you with the information you need to successfully diagnose and treat feline inappropriate elimination problems so that you can help decrease the rate of shelter relinquishment (and keep your patients!).

### Causes & Treatment of Feline Inappropriate Elimination

The first step in treating feline inappropriate elimination is to try and determine what is causing it via a thorough behavioral history. There are four main reasons why cats eliminate outside their litter box: 1) hormonal, 2) medical, 3) litter box problem, and 4) urine marking. Hormonal, medical and urine marking as causes for inappropriate elimination will be discussed in an alternate lecture. Here we concentrate on inappropriate elimination that is caused by litter box aversion.



## Diagnosing a Litter Box Problem

The following are points to consider when diagnosing a feline litter box problem:

- Occurs in any age, breed, or sex (Persian or long-haired cats may be over-represented).
- Can be either urine or feces or both.
- If it is urine, always large amounts (puddles) are released.
- Litter box may be avoided completely.
- LOCATION is the most important diagnostic tool. Surfaces soiled upon are typically soft, absorbent, horizontally-orientated, and “boring” (e.g., area rugs, carpeted floors, bath mats, towels/clothing left on floor) when compared with the more interesting-sounding urine or fecal marked areas (e.g., on new boyfriend’s kayak, on new baby’s swing). Eliminations may be found on a floor near the litter box indicating that the cat approached the vicinity of the litterbox but did not like what she found when she got there (this rules out a litterbox location aversion; problem more likely to involve some feature of the litterbox itself or hygiene issue).
- The following behaviors may indicate that a cat is not happy with his/her facilities: Scratching on the sides of the litter box or on a nearby floor or wall, teetering on the edges of a non-hooded litter box to avoid stepping in the litter, refraining from circling or digging in the litter (or digging for <4 seconds), hesitating to enter the box, exiting the box in a rush, or sniffing the box and then walking away.
- Litter box arrangement, including: Number of litter boxes in the house, type of litter used, number of cats in the house, litter box hygiene.

## Treatment for a Litter Box Problem

Because it is not always possible to know which litter box attribute(s) is aversive to the cat, a multi-factorial approach is often employed. The objectives of the treatment for a litter box problem are 1) to make the litter box arrangement more attractive to the cat, 2) to make the soiled areas less attractive to the cat, and 3) to properly clean the soiled areas.

A. Make the litter box arrangement more attractive; owners should implement ALL of the following treatments in conjunction for best results:

- Litter type: Cats prefer unscented, clumping, fine-grained, sandy litter.
- Litter box hygiene/odor: Cats may avoid their litter box if it is not clean enough. Daily scooping is recommended to reduce odor and increase the ratio of litter to clumps. Clumping litter should be replaced entirely on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. Harsh smelling chemicals such as ammonia or bleach should not be used to clean a litter box. Scrubbing with a sponge and hot water is all that is needed. Noisy automated litter boxes frighten some cats and could cause a litter box aversion. However, for those cats that are not frightened, the automated boxes are great from a hygiene perspective. Zero Odor, a litter box spray (and carpet cleaner), can be sprayed onto the surface of the litter twice

daily to reduce litter box odor (it's non-toxic).

- Litter depth: Cats were originally desert dwellers and like to dig in sand. Litter boxes should be maintained at a depth of at least 3 inches of litter to simulate a sandy environment. Owners can also experiment with litter depth preference by spreading the litter on a gradient within the litter box.
- Number of litter boxes: The formula for the appropriate number of litter boxes in the house is the number of cats in the household plus 1 ( $N + 1$ ). Some cats prefer to urinate in one litter box and defecate in another.
- Type/size of litter box: Most cats prefer LARGE, OPEN litter pans and, therefore, we recommend that owners remove hoods from most or all boxes in the house. Low-sided boxes are easier for cats to enter—especially arthritic cats—but make maintenance of appropriate litter depth more difficult. A box in a box (with sides cut low) can be utilized for arthritic cats, or a ramp can be used. The appropriate length of a litter box is 1.5 times longer than the cat's body length. Many commercially available litter boxes are too small for today's cat.
- Litter box accessories: Cats do not appreciate plastic mats placed around the perimeter of the box that are designed to deter litter from being tracked throughout the house. Also, plastic litter box liners are not desirable from the cat's perspective.
- Litter box location: There should be at least one litter box on every floor of the house. Boxes need to be spread out within the house. Two boxes next to one another = one box. The box locations should be low-traffic and easily accessible. Cats prefer not to eat where they eliminate, thus litter boxes should not be near a feeding station. Ideally, a litter box should be placed in the area(s) where the cat is soiling outside of the box, because the cat may have a preference for that location for some reason. Litterboxes should not be placed next to any appliances that could be deemed frightening by the cat (e.g., washing machines, ceiling fans).

B. Make the soiled areas less attractive or unavailable:

- The soiled site can be covered with foil or plastic so that it is textually unappealing. Cats find the scent of citrus objectionable. Orange or lemon scented air fresheners or body sprays could be used to make an area aversive to a cat as well as commercially available odor deterrents. One such product is called Boundary Spray, which must be applied daily in order to be effective.
- Place the cat's food bowl at the area previously soiled.
- Furniture can be rearranged to make a soiled area unavailable for elimination.
- For cats that are defecating or urinating in bathtubs or sinks, keep the basin filled with 2 inches of water.
- Double sided sticky tape can be used to make a surface tactilely unappealing and is commercially available for this purpose.
- SSScat is a motion-activated aerosol spray can that has been shown to be effective,

resulting in location avoidance.

- Keeping certain doors closed may be in order to thwart the cat's attempt to inappropriately eliminate in a certain location.
- In severe cases, confinement of the cat to a small room with numerous litterboxes (and not much else) could help to jumpstart a return to appropriate litterbox usage. However, not all cats can handle this level of isolation well, and it could be counterproductive. Gradual exposure to the house may be necessary to avoid reoccurrence.

C. Proper clean-up of the soiled areas: This important step is often overlooked in the treatment process. Urine and fecal matter must be broken down by a cleaning product that is meant for this purpose or the cat might be triggered to eliminate in that area again.

- Clean all surfaces, rugs, etc. with a professional odor neutralizer (e.g., Nature's Miracle, OxiClean, Zero Odor, and Anti-icky-Poo).
- Check the area with a black light to ensure the urine has actually broken down and removed.
- The owner should repeat this process for each soiled area if urine is detected with a black light or the odor of urine lingers.

#### Determining the Culprit in Multi-Cat Households

An important consideration in treating feline inappropriate elimination problems is to ensure that the right cat within the home is treated! There could be more than one. In some cases, it could be well worth the effort of systematically determining which cat(s) is inappropriately eliminating. There are two ways this can be achieved:

- 1.) Separate and monitor all cats. Give each their own litter box and feeding stations. However, this process can be unsuccessful because separating the cats disturbs the social dynamic and can decrease stress-related inappropriate elimination.
- 2.) Orally administer fluorescein dye to one cat (put the tips of six ophthalmic strips into a gel capsule) once daily and check for *intensely* glowing urine stains via a fluorescent black light. Owners should check a non-fluorescein dyed urine stain under black light before evaluating one containing the dye in order to avoid confusion over the intensity of the urine glow.



#### **What not to do:**

Do not punish the cat when caught in the act or afterwards. Cats will not associate a reprimand with the act of inappropriate elimination after the fact. Owners should never "rub the cat's face in the soiled area to teach it a lesson" or bring the cat to the area and tell it "No!". Use of spray bottles when caught in the act does not usually work. Punishment teaches a cat to avoid eliminating outside of the box in front of the owner. If the punishment is severe enough, it could cause the cat to fear and avoid the owner as well.

Do not place the cat in the litter box. This technique does not work. It has to be that the cat wants to use the litter box *and voluntarily seeks it out*. The owner should concentrate on making the household litter box arrangement as cat-friendly as possible.

### PART 3 - FELINE FURNITURE SCRATCHING

At Tufts Animal Behavior Clinic owners rarely bring their cats to us for treatment of excessive furniture scratching; however, as a practicing veterinarian, you will surely be asked about it. Becoming familiar with the etiology and treatment for furniture scratching will serve you well.

#### Background: Ethology

In the wild, cats scratch prominent locations within and around their immediate environment to signal to other cats their erstwhile presence and to put dibs on the area in question. Cats' scratch marking is thought to occur in two forms: visual and olfactory. The visual mark is in the form of clawing marks on the object in question. The olfactory mark is subtler and is thought to involve the release of a pheromone from superficial glands in the skin of the cat's paws through the process of kneading.

Scratching has ancillary functions, too. The act of cats digging their claws into some resistant material provides them with a form of physical therapy for the all-important muscles and tendons of their dexterous digits and assists in the process of shucking off old nail husks. That cats stretch and attach their claws to the nearest substrate on awakening may have very little to do with marking or conditioning. This type of reaching may serve more of a calisthenic purpose, akin to our own stretching, serving to assure readiness by a process of limbering up. Presumably the post-slumber stretch also provides some gratification.

All cats are born scratch-markers, but some are more avid at it than others. Genetics may play a role here as well as learning and the environment. Cats born to dyed-in-the-wool scratch-marking parents may be more likely to exhibit furniture scratching at a problem level. Whether there is a gene that determines the "scratcher extraordinaire's" incentive, or whether kittens witnessing their mom's scratching excesses learn their trade by observation is not absolutely certain. It may be that the environmental stresses can influence the cat to scratch as a displacement behavior.

#### The Domestic Situation

It is in the home that scratching can become a real problem—not for the cat but for the owner. Even the relatively secure housecat will occasionally feel the need to scratch, and the most usual substrate is furniture. If the target were a well-positioned scratching post, most owners would have no problem with this state of affairs. But unfortunately, all too commonly, cats shun this owner-preferred location and choose an obvious and "inappropriate" location on the finest furniture. Faced with this dilemma, many people turn to their veterinarian. Whether a

particular veterinarian will recommend declaw surgery as a treatment for scratching will depend on the veterinarian asked. Some veterinarians will recommend exploring non-surgical options before resorting to a declaw surgery as a last resort. Some refuse to do it in any situation based on ethical grounds. Others declaw proactively as part of a new kitten spay/neuter package.

To declaw or not to declaw is a hot ethical debate in the United States. Opponents decry surgical or laser onychectomy as unnecessary, painful, liken it to a form of mutilation, and claim it can lead to increases in aggression and inappropriate elimination problems. Supporters argue that 1) the recovery process need not be painful with use of proper analgesics, 2) it's effective to solve the furniture scratching problem, and 3) keeps cats from being relinquished or euthanized. The American Veterinary Medical Association's position on declawing is that it is acceptable as a last resort if non-surgical treatments have been attempted or a zoonotic disease threat is present. Many European countries have banned the procedure, considering it an act of animal cruelty. The Humane Society of the United States "opposes declawing of cats when done solely for the convenience of the owner and without benefit to the animal." In the U.S., declawing has been banned in some cities. West Hollywood, California was the first to do it in 2003, followed by Norfolk, Virginia in 2007. Numerous other cities in California have also banned declawing, including Los Angeles, Beverly Hills, Berkeley, Santa Monica, and San Francisco. However, in 2009 the California senate passed a bill that prevents cities and counties from banning declawing (ban took effect in 2010).

To declaw or not to declaw is an ethical decision you'll have to make for yourself. As you may know, Tufts Small Animal Hospital does not offer declaw surgery as a service to its clients.

### **Treatment: How to Stop a Cat from Scratching Furniture without Declawing**

#### 1.) Scratching posts → to persuade a cat to use a scratching post, there are several must-know facts:

- a.) If a furniture scratching problem exists, the number of scratching posts that should be employed is  $N+1$  (where  $N$  = number of cats in household). Once the problem is under control, scratching post usage can be evaluated and those that are not being used can be removed.
- b.) Each scratching post should be tall enough for the cat(s) to stretch up on their hind limbs to their full height without being able to reach the top (i.e., posts should be 3-4 feet high). This is especially true for ones near sleeping areas to accommodate the "7th inning stretch".
- c.) The scratching post should be steady. Wobbly posts just won't do. No self-respecting cat will entertain the thought of using a post that rocks or falls over.
- d.) Use the correct material. Since a function of scratching may be to leave a visible mark, fabric that doesn't tear or fray may not be attractive. Burlap is a favorite with many cats as is sisal rope.
- e.) Choose an attractive location for the cat. Most people try to hide scratching posts from view. This may negate a purpose of scratching for the cat since scratching may be a form

of marking behavior. The cat could want the fruits of its labor to be exposed for full view. Posts should be positioned in obvious areas at first, preferably near scratching sites that the cat has selected for itself.

## 2.) Deterrents

- a.) Physical: If a particularly valuable piece of furniture must be protected during retraining, heavy gauge plastic sheeting can be applied to the object to alter its texture and thus to serve as a deterrent. Double-sided sticky tape can also be applied to furniture and deter scratching.
- b.) Chemical: Some proprietary repellent sprays may work for some cats to keep them from scratching a particular place, though the area has to be “freshened” periodically as the odor will fade. Remember, however, that an owner doesn’t need to be able to smell the chemical for it to be strong enough to deter their cat.
- c.) Pheromonal: “Feliway”, a supposed pheromone-containing proprietary spray, has been touted as a repellent for furniture-scratching cats. The idea is that the pheromone—a natural scent signal (and in this case an extract of feline facial secretions)—will alter the “significance” of the previously scratch-marked area. It is as if a sign of “peace and love” is left for the cat to replace the more intimidating message conveyed by scent marking by means of the paws. We cannot attest to the efficacy of this deterrent on furniture scratching but have heard some less than favorable reports of its efficacy.
- d.) Medical: If scratching persists at a compulsive rate (and this is a professional judgment call), it may help to treat furniture-scratching cats with anti-obsessional medication to “insulate” them against unavoidable environmental pressures.

## 3.) Soft Paws™

Soft Paws are plastic nail caps that can be glued onto a cat’s claws following a preliminary nail trim. The upside is that the results are often spectacular, with damage to furniture practically non-existent while the nail caps remain in place. The manufacturers recommend a complete replacement nail job every month or so, but we have found that replacing lost nails individually as they fall off is quite satisfactory (and far less work). On the downside, fitting such nail caps is not everyone’s cup of tea and not all cats are equally receptive to being restrained for the process.

## 4.) Nail Trims

Damage to furniture caused by cats scratching it can be reduced if the cat’s nails are kept well-trimmed. Again, it helps if owners can learn to do this themselves and keep sharp nail trimmers on board.