



Feline faux paws: dealing with inappropriate elimination

One of the most difficult problems pet owners deal with is inappropriate elimination (a polite metaphor for urinating or defecating in the house outside of the litter pan). The two main causes of inappropriate elimination are **medical** or **behavioral** problems. Medical causes must first be ruled out. There are many medical illnesses which could affect our pets' "bathroom habits." Physical examination and some simple laboratory tests are needed to make this determination.

If the situation is not due to a medical illness, the possibility of a purely behavioral problem can be explored. It is necessary to understand the exact nature of the problem behavior. If urine is involved, is the cat urinating or marking?

Urination is characterized by the cat approaching a specific surface or location, digging with the forepaws to make a depression, standing over the depression with hind legs flexed, depositing urine on a horizontal surface, and making sweeping or pawing motions of the forepaws to cover up the urine.

Inappropriate urination could be due to preference for or aversion to a specific litter or location. In the wild, cats have numerous choices; however, our pets are limited to commercial litter in the litter box we select. Cats that walk on, dig in, and cover with their litter are happy with it. A cat that dislikes the litter may straddle the edge of the litter box to avoid touching the litter with its feet; shake its paws after stepping on the litter; dig outside of the box on the wall, floor of the room, or side of the box; quickly run out of the box; or cry or meow on its way to the box. Also, these cats may not dig before, or cover after, elimination because they dislike touching the litter. **Litter aversion** may be learned rather than innate. For example, a cat who soils its paws after diarrhea in the litter may develop an aversion to that litter type and may continue eliminating elsewhere even when fresh litter is

provided. Litter aversion frequently begins with the owner changing to a new type of litter, especially one that has larger particles, is deodorized or is more dusty than a previous one. The first step in treating this problem is to maximize cleanliness/freshness, take the hood off the litter box, and simultaneously offer several different litter types, sand, or even wood chips in different litter pans. Studies show that most cats prefer litter with a small, uniform granule size.)

In **location preference** a cat eliminates outside the box at one or more spots. An

called urine spraying, is characterized by the cat backing up to a vertical surface, standing with hind legs straight and tail quivering and upright and stepping alternately with the hind legs while squirting urine onto a surface. Marking is believed to serve as a form of communication and may indicate territorial, sexual, or interactive behavior. The cat that marks may be responding sexually to a female in heat or may be competitive, aggressive, or afraid of another cat in the household. An outdoor cat that can be seen or heard by an indoor cat may elicit marking.

In this instance, owners should watch for behaviors such as running to or away from windows, hissing, growling, or raising back and tail hair. Introducing a new cat to the household, the maturation of kittens to adulthood, separation from the owner for several days, the presence of a new person, a frightening experience near the litter box or other emotional experiences can also induce marking. The odor of cat urine in the household definitely elicits further marking behavior. Some cats begin marking in the litter box, which goes unnoticed by the owner until the cat extends his range of marking locations throughout the home.

For male cats the primary **treatment** for marking is castration. Environmental manipulation and behavior modification are usually not effective. Sometimes, the use of drugs after castration may be necessary in treating this problem.

As can be seen, there are many possible reasons for inappropriate elimination which may require vastly different approaches in treatment. If your pet is displaying any abnormalities in its elimination behavior, please consult your veterinarian. Whether the problem is medical or behavioral, the earlier treatment is begun, the greater the success in resolving the problem.

example is the cat that urinates or defecates on carpet but only in one corner. The presence of mild urine odor may make that location more desirable. In **location aversion** the cat is repelled by something at a location previously tolerated. A number of factors can lead to this such as strong odor at the spot, a frightening episode in or near the box, a cover placed over a previously uncovered box, or painful elimination in the box. In location preference or aversion, changing the environment in combination with drug therapy may be necessary to change the problem behavior.

In contrast to urination, **marking**, also



Routine Maintenance

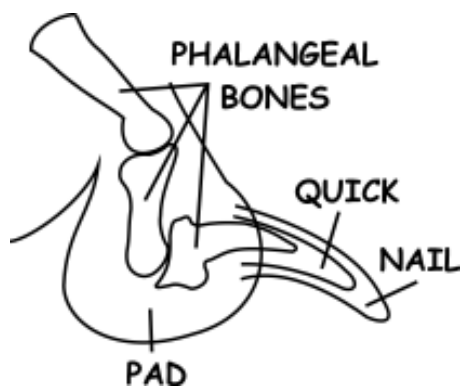
As we discussed in our last issue, pet ownership brings with it the "routine maintenance" chores of regular grooming (bathing, ear cleaning, nail trimming, and teeth brushing). Our last issue discussed the proper care of a pet's ears. In this issue, we will cover nail trimming. There are three requirements for successfully trimming a pet's toenails: the cooperation of the pet, a knowledge of toenail anatomy, and the proper equipment.

A cooperative companion

The first step in nail trimming is to accustom one's pet to having its feet manipulated. Ideally, this needs to begin early in life. Gently holding the pet's paw and moving the toes can overcome an aversion to grooming that many animals have.

Don't cut to the quick!

A pet's toenail contains an extremely sensitive area referred to as the "quick." This



region contains the nerves and vessels supplying the nail and, if cut, will lead to significant bleeding and some discomfort. Cat nails and white dog nails allow one to see the underlying pink-hued quick. Dark pigmented dog nails present more of a problem and require gradual trimming until the area of the quick is approached.

A tool for every job

The best tool for trimming pets' nails is a Rescoe trimmer. Accept no substitutes! We have found that cheap imitations and human nail clippers do not provide the same ease of use and accuracy. The Rescoe works on a guillotine principle and allows one to see exactly how much nail will be clipped. In addition, a quality cautery powder such as Kwik-Stop is a must. These products may be found at veterinary clinics and most pet supply stores.

Premium Pet Foods

Dogs and cats have an opportunity to live longer, healthier lives today because of important advances in pet nutrition. There are three categories of pet food available to consumers: generic, grocery store brands, and premium brands. Generic brand pet foods have no name recognition and may be packaged in containers marked simply as dog or cat food. We recommend these products be avoided. Grocery store brands (Pedigree, Purina Dog Chow, Alpo, etc.) have name recognition and do provide a higher quality nutrition than the generic lines. Premium pet foods (Science Diet, Health Blend, ProPlan, Eukanuba, etc.) are usually sold through veterinary hospitals or pet supply stores. The primary advantages of feeding premium pet foods are higher digestibility and palatability. It has been shown that pets can be fed a smaller quantity of a premium pet food and obtain the same or better nutritional benefit as from lower quality brands. In addition, a smaller amount of waste is produced by the pet. (A great bonus for those of us who regularly patrol our yards!) Shoal Creek Animal Clinic carries two brands of premium pet food: Health Blend from Hills and Purina's ProPlan. Both are excellent premium pet foods and, unlike other major premium brands, they offer purchasing

incentives to the pet owner. (Food is the single greatest annual expense related to pet ownership.) Health Blend offers \$20.00/year/pet up to ten years of the pet's life if the animal is enrolled in their Preventive Health Care Program. Purina offers pet owners a "buy six - get one free" program. If you have already committed to using a premium pet food for your companion, you may wish to consider using a product that gives you something in return. Please ask our staff about Health Blend and ProPlan foods.

Staff News

New Faces...

Elena Tolbert, a sophomore at the University of Georgia, is an Athens native. Elena is working towards a degree in Animal Science in preparation for a career in veterinary medicine. When not studying or working as a veterinary assistant at Shoal Creek, Elena enjoys running, playing the viola, and spending time with her cats (Silken and Sebatsian).

Janet Raymond is our newest Veterinary Assistant. Janet is a long time resident of Watkinsville and is also studying Animal Science at UGA. Janet spends her free time running and horseback riding. Her menagerie consists of her two horses, Beauty and Moonie, and her dog, Streak.



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