



**When a cat urinates or defecates outside of their litterbox, it's called house soiling. Understanding the causes and working with your veterinarian can help you address your cat's physical and emotional needs and help guide them back to using their litterbox.**

### Why Call It "House Soiling"?

"House soiling" is a neutral term that simply describes the behaviour without judgment or negative labels. Cats house soil to communicate unmet needs or as a symptom of a health issue, not out of spite or anger. Using non-judgmental language promotes empathy while we respond to our cat's call for help.

### What Causes House Soiling?

House soiling can result from one or more of these four factors. Each should be considered to identify the root of the issue.

1. **Medical conditions:** House soiling can be a symptom of medical conditions that cause a feeling of urgency, increases the frequency, or causes discomfort. Conditions like urinary tract infections, bladder stones or crystals, arthritis, constipation, inflammatory bowel disease, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, or even obesity can affect a cat's litterbox habits. Even after recovery, a cat may associate the litterbox with pain and avoid it. A veterinary check-up is essential to rule out any health issues.
2. **Feline Interstitial Cystitis (FIC):** FIC, sometimes also called Feline Idiopathic Cystitis, is a painful inflammation of the bladder lining. Stress and anxiety are risk factors for FIC, especially in younger, overweight, or inactive cats. A vet will perform tests to rule out other conditions and assess environmental factors that could contribute to FIC-related house soiling.

**Important:** Straining or inability to urinate may indicate a life-threatening emergency called a urinary blockage. If your cat makes frequent, painful attempts to urinate, vocalizes, licks their genital area excessively, or has blood in their urine, take them to a vet immediately – do not wait!

3. **Marking:** Cats use scent and pheromones to communicate and mark their territory by scratching, rubbing, or urinating in specific areas. If a cat's familiar smells are removed, they may feel insecure and mark more often to feel secure. Stressed, insecure, and unspayed/unneutered cats are more likely to mark. Marking behaviour is essential for cats, so provide multiple scratching posts by windows, doors, and resting spots so your cat has approved outlets for marking.



### Spraying vs. Urination:

Watch for these differences to help you determine if your cat is spraying (marking with urine) or simply urinating.

#### **Spraying:**

- Stand with straight hind legs, raise their tail up (which may vibrate or twitch) while releasing a small amount of urine on a vertical surface, like a wall.
- Threats from outside may trigger marking near windows, external doors, or on unfamiliar objects brought inside or from out of storage, like suitcases.
- Stress from inside the home, like other pets and routine changes, can trigger spraying near inner doorways, central rooms, or around important resources.
- Still use their litterbox to urinate throughout the day and frequency of the spraying may seem random.

#### **Urination:**

- Empty their entire bladder onto horizontal surfaces (like litter, dirt, or blankets) while squatting.
- They typically dig first, and most cats will cover their waste afterwards.
- Urination usually follows a consistent pattern.

Not every cat follows the same pattern, so consult a qualified behaviourist if you're unsure if your cat is spraying or urinating.

***Did you know?*** Defecating for scent marking is called "middening" and is the least common form of marking.

4. **Environmental and Social Factors:** Conflict with household members can create stress and litterbox avoidance, especially if the cat feels unsafe or is blocked from the litterbox. Social factors that can cause litterbox avoidance include cats blocking other cats from accessing the litterbox or attacking them while they use it, dogs chasing or harassing cats, and unfamiliar people or loud activity.

Avoid doing unpleasant tasks, like nail trims or medicating, near the litterbox. Do not repeatedly place your cat inside their litterbox or rub their paws in the litter to "teach" them to use it.

Litterboxes that are too small, not clean, or inconveniently placed may be unacceptable to your cat. Provide multiple large, clean litterboxes with their preferred litter in separated, safe locations to meet your cat's needs. Cats should be able to access and use their litterbox without crossing paths with or being ambushed by another animal. Cats who feel insecure may choose a spot where they feel safest, like their caretaker's bed, if their litterbox is not safe or acceptable for them.



## Troubleshooting

### Signs of Trouble:

There are often warning signs before a cat starts house soiling. If you notice any of these behaviours, especially if they are new, your cat may be experiencing discomfort or issues with the litterbox:

- Not digging before voiding or not burying waste afterward.
- Digging but leaving without using the box.
- Standing on the edge of the box.
- Running out of the box after using it (May look like the “zoomies”).
- Vocalizing in the litterbox.
- Urinating or defecating immediately beside the litterbox.

### Let's Talk About Stress

Stress plays a major role in house soiling, often worsening with health issues, changes, or conflicts. Reduce stress by optimizing your cat's environment, providing enrichment, providing extra litterboxes if there is conflict between cats, and ensuring the litterbox meets their needs. Work with your veterinarian to create a stress-reduction plan tailored to your cat.

**Important:** *If you have multiple cats it is best to have at minimum one box per cat, plus one extra. For example, if you have three cats, you'll need at least four boxes.*

### Litter and Litterbox Preferences

For tips on creating the ideal litterbox setup, check out our Litterbox Guide. If your cat has a litterbox they *prefer* instead of one they just *tolerate*, they will be less likely to toilet outside of their box.

Try a litter preference test to find what your cat prefers. Use three or more litterboxes with different types of litter, tracking which one your cat uses most. You can also use a large, low sided bin or plastic kiddie pool divided into sections with cardboard and fill each section with a different litter. Some cats prefer different litters for urinating and defecating, so offer their top two choices in separate boxes.

### Managing Accidents

Covering soiled areas without addressing the root causes may prompt your cat to select a new spot. Try placing a litterbox near the area to see if they prefer that location, but if the litterbox setup is the issue, this won't resolve the house soiling.



# Cat Behaviour Guide

## House Soiling in Cats



Use disposable puppy pads or washable waterproof covers to protect furniture and flooring and make cleanup easier. Plastic coverings can be placed on vertical surfaces to direct urine onto trays or absorbent pads below. These are temporary solutions while you work on resolving the underlying issue. For detailed cleaning instructions, see our [Cleaning Cat Urine](#) guide.

### What To Do:

Here are steps to help prevent and manage house soiling:

- **Vet Check:** Schedule a vet visit to rule out health issues. Even if your cat had a clean bill of health recently, new conditions can arise.
- **Spay/Neuter:** This reduces hormonally driven marking behaviours.
- **Professional Help:** A qualified trainer or veterinary behaviourist can offer guidance.
- **Nutrition:** Feed a balanced diet, including canned food, and provide fresh water. Your vet may recommend a urinary health diet if needed.
- **Optimize the Litterbox:** Follow our [Litterbox Guide](#) to meet your cat's needs.
- **Reduce Stress:** Provide hiding spots, scratching posts, and daily quality time with your cat.
- **Respect Their Senses:** Offer multiple scratching posts for scent marking. Avoid strong candles, scented plug-ins, and cleaning products. Pheromone diffusers like Feliway may also help.
- **Gradual Changes:** Avoid frequent and sudden changes to the litterbox.
- **Don't Punish:** Punishing your cat increases stress and doesn't solve the problem. It can lead to fear and avoidance, making issues worse.

**Remember:** If your cat is house soiling, they're communicating that something is wrong and need your help to be healthy and feel secure.

### **Additional Resources:**

For more information, visit our website: [www.edmontonhumanesociety.com](http://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com) or [www.catfriendly.com/house-soiling](http://www.catfriendly.com/house-soiling) for support on prevention and management of house soiling.

It takes approximately \$7 million to keep the Edmonton Humane Society operational for one year and 40% of these funds come from generous donations made by supporters like you. [Donate today.](#)