



# Inappropriate toileting

## A Yorkshire Cat Rescue Guide

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## Getting inside the cats mind – normal toileting behaviour

Be aware that the cat's main priority in life – at an instinctive level - is to feel safe. This need outweighs virtually every other requirement. Cats feel safe in a familiar environment with few changes and in a situation which doesn't vary greatly from day to day. Going to the toilet makes a cat “vulnerable”, as its attention is focused elsewhere and not concerned with safety. A cat will therefore choose a safe place to toilet - usually its litter tray or regular places in the garden are satisfactory. If the litter tray or garden do not feel like safe places for the cat then they will toilet elsewhere such as your bed, doormat or hidden places such as behind the television.

## Getting inside the cats mind – inappropriate toileting behaviour

Toileting on a bed is not usually about territory marking (cats don't urinate or defecate to mark their territory, they will use urine as a spray if not neutered, but will not use normal urination as a territory marker). Using the bed or sofa is a sign that the cat feels safe with the people in its home and where their smell is the most pronounced is a safe place for the cat to be. Because we spend so long in our beds, the human scent is stronger there, so the cat feels safe there. Toileting on a door mat may be an indicator that the cat wants to go outside but is afraid to do so. If something is preventing him toileting outside, he will get as close to the outside as possible – and this is usually the doormat or near the door. Toileting in a hidden place is usually an indicator that your cat doesn't feel at all safe in the home.

## Solving the problem

First things first - get your cat checked by a vet. In some cases inappropriate toileting is due to a medical issue such as cystitis which can be treated. Left untreated, not only will the cat continue to mess, but it may be in considerable discomfort and even in danger of becoming ill. Cats that experience pain when going to the toilet will start to avoid things like litter trays believing them to be a source of the pain

Once your cat has been given the all-clear by the vet, you need to take a careful look at the circumstances of your cat's life. Has he or she always toileted inappropriately, or is it a recent occurrence? Is it ongoing or is it sporadic?



## Ongoing toileting problems

It is likely that the cat is suffering from stress and is feeling vulnerable in its surroundings. You must take steps to reassure your cat in a manner that he understands. Take a look at the circumstances in which your cat lives – are there any things you could remove from the cat's environment which may reduce the stress it suffers? Is the litter tray in a safe place, somewhere where the cat can toilet without having a need to protect itself? Is there another pet in the house that the cat feels uncomfortable?

Make the cat's environment a safer place and you will reduce the overall stress levels in the cat. Provide safe areas up high that the cat can retreat to. Make sure other pets (eg dogs) and young children can't access the safe place. If possible, never interrupt the cat when in its safe place. If you have more than one cat, give each cat a safe place.

## Sporadic or recent toileting problems

If the inappropriate toileting is sporadic or has recently started it may be easier to establish a cause for the behaviour. Monitor the times that the cat toilets inappropriately. If it follows a regular pattern, could it be that something is frightening it? Examples could be loud noises (such as the dustbin lorry), a neighbour letting his dog out at a certain time of day, children coming home from school and the noise of their chatter frightening the cat.

If the cat has started having toilet problems when it had previously used the litter tray or garden then it is worth thinking if there have been any changes in the household at about the same time? These may be permanent changes (such as a new baby, new settee, change of working pattern of the humans), or a one-off change which has unsettled the cat and caused it to develop a new habit (such as a house guest, party, change around of furniture etc).

It might be possible to avoid some of the triggers to the cats unwanted behaviour, if the cat is responding to a permanent change then it is possible with patience for the cat to come to terms with the changes in its environment.



## Managing inappropriate toileting

Most inappropriate toileting is caused by cats feeling vulnerable so trying to make your cat feel generally more secure at home will help. The key is for the place you would like the cat to toilet to be one where they feel safe. If you would like the cat to use the garden but the cat does not feel safe there, you will need to provide an indoor litter tray at least temporarily. If the cat gains confidence in the garden or the threat in the garden is removed then you can dispense with the litter tray again once the cat is using the garden. Position the litter tray somewhere quiet that the cat is free to access at all times. If you have more than one cat then increase the number of litter trays so that no individual cat will 'own' the litter tray. Until the problem is solved it is a good idea to have as many litter trays as cats plus one. Some cats prefer litter trays with covered hoods, while others prefer them open.

It is important to use a correct product to clean up when a cat has toileted in an inappropriate place. Some cleaning fluids contain ammonia, and this has a similar scent to urine, so that the cat thinks that the trace smells indicate that this is the place where he **should** toilet, and so on he goes and a habit is formed. Cats dislike citrus scents, so clean the area with a product which has no ammonia in it, but which has a citrus smell. The cat should avoid this area. Be careful not to use bleach for cleaning the litter tray or any area where the cat has toileted – this is poisonous to cats, as are some other cleaning products (as a general rule, disinfectants and cleaners which become cloudy when added to water should be avoided as these can be fatally poisonous to cats). Temporarily moving furniture to where the cat has toileted can also break the bad habit.

## Other suggestions

There are various products on the market that may reduce stress in cats. We can recommend Feliway™, a plug-in pheromone emitter which sends out soothing sub-conscious smells to relax a cat. The plug-in diffuser is very good for making cats feel more relaxed and should be plugged in in the room that the cat uses most. If the cat is 'spraying' and using its urine to mark territory (aiming urine at walls etc where the cat can be seen to arch and the tail vibrates while it is spraying) then spraying Feliway™ liquid at the site can prevent further marking as cats do not like to facial mark and urine mark in the same place.

Bach flower remedies may also relax a stressed cat – these can be bought from participating health food shops and are, as their name suggests, extracts from flowers. You can add a few drops to your cat's drinking water.

Please be aware, that we do not intend to criticise any owners in this leaflet. By referring to cats feeling "unsafe" we are not implying that owners are being cruel or deliberately stressing their cats. It's simply that as humans we tend to interpret



behaviour (both cat and human) in human terms. As humans we have to learn to “speak cat” and understand what the cat needs, what it is telling us by its behaviour and how to manage that behaviour.