



## Q & A Session for the Veterinary team – 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020

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*(Please note some of the questions have been re-worded to summarise them and additions have been made to a few of the answers. Where it was felt inappropriate or difficult to answer particular questions in an open forum, the questioners have been contacted individually and offered relevant help and advice.)*

**Q. Can you describe what you mean by 'blocking'? You mentioned it a couple of times in the introduction.**

**A.** This is a behaviour that is not uncommon in a multi-cat household where one cat 'blocks' another's access to resources (e.g. food, water, resting places, access to outside and/or litter trays). Blocking is most likely to occur when all, or most of these resources are located in the same room, or in the same area of the house.

Cats that are blocking will generally sit or lie in the middle of a corridor, in a doorway or (a very popular position) sprawled across the stairs. They might swipe at the other cat if it attempts to get by, but often just their presence in this position can be enough to deter the other cat from even trying.

**Q. Litter trays are often placed in the utility room. Is that OK, or can that cause problems?**

**A.** The problem with utility rooms is that they also contain other things that might deter a cat from using the litter tray. For example:

- The cat's food and water – Cats generally do not like to use a litter tray close to where they eat
- The cat flap and/or back door - A cat can feel quite vulnerable when using a litter tray and this feeling of vulnerability can be increased if the litter tray is positioned close to entrances and exits through which other cats might suddenly appear.
- Washing machines and tumble dryers – Household machinery that might make loud, sudden or usual sounds could frighten a cat and deter it from using the litter tray.

However, although it is important to be aware of potential problems, if a cat is using a litter tray in a utility room without any issues, re locating the litter tray might be more disruptive for the cat. So, in such cases I would advise leaving the litter tray where it is and introducing at least one other in a separate area to give the cat choice.

**Q. Is there somewhere that you do recommend that people put the litter tray?**

**A.** The most important thing is that litter trays are positioned in a location where the cat is less likely to be disturbed or feel threatened. So, it is best to avoid walkways, next to frequently used cupboards, near to glass doors or floor to ceiling windows through which other cats might be seen, or close to the cat flap or other entrances and exits. A good place can sometimes be in the bathroom if there is enough space, or in a spare room or in a quiet corner of the kitchen, or even the utility room if the deterring factors mentioned above can be avoided.

## **Q. What do you think about covered litter-trays?**

**A.** Whether we use a covered or uncovered litter tray can depend on the personal preference of the individual cat. But there can be potential problems with using covered trays.

- It is not so easy to see when a covered tray needs cleaning.
- Odours can become trapped inside, which can be a major deterrent for a lot of cats.
- In multi-cat households covered trays can allow for ambushing or trapping and can often be a site of conflict between cats.
- Covered trays can also take up a lot of space, but very often the size of the area that can be used by the cat is still not quite big enough for the cat to use comfortably.

A good alternative to a covered tray is a high-sided plastic storage box with one side cut down to allow the cat access. This can provide the cat with an increased sense of security, without it feeling trapped, and without trapping odours. Plus, it is much easier to see when it needs cleaning.

## **Q. Because some cats prefer separate litter trays for urinating and defaecating, do you recommend that these are placed in the same room, but distant from each other, or in completely separate rooms.**

**A.** If a cat requires separate areas, it is important that there is a reasonable distance between the litter trays. However, the act of urinating might stimulate the need to defecate (or visa-versa) and if the other litter tray is too far away. i.e. in another room, or on another level of the house, then the cat might choose, or have no other option than to defaecate (or urinate) in the same room, but at a distance from the litter tray it has just used.

But there are reasons why additional litter trays might also need to be provided in other locations. For example:

- In a multi-cat household to avoid or to address issues of resource competition leading to blocking or direct conflict.
- If the cat has mobility, cognitive or urgency issues that might make it difficult for it to reach or find the nearest litter tray in time. (For example, if the cat is in the bedroom and the nearest litter tray is downstairs in the kitchen or utility room)
- If the house is very large.
- If the cat is pregnant or nursing. A heavily pregnant cat may need to have access to a litter tray fairly quickly. And if nursing she may be reluctant to move too far away from her kittens.

## **Q. Is it stressful for cats that have cat flap access to outside to expect them to only toilet outside or should they also be provided with an indoor litter tray?**

**A.** This really depends on the individual cat and the potential threats or challenges that it is likely to encounter when attempting to eliminate outdoors. (*This is covered in greater detail in the answer to a later question*). However, it is very important that a litter tray and suitable substrate is always easily 'at hand' and can be provided immediately for the cat if it needs to be shut in for any reason, or if it does start to eliminate indoors.

## **Q. In the vet practice, a lot of cats prefer to sit in their litter trays rather than use them for elimination. Is this because they don't have a litter tray at home and don't know how to use them? Should owners train their cats to use a litter tray before the cats are admitted into the hospital? Or is there anything we can do to encourage these cats to use their litter trays?**

**A.** Cats often sit in their litter trays in a hospital cage because it helps them to feel enclosed and can help to increase their sense of security. Providing a hiding place for the cat within the kennel can sometimes help,

but the cat might still prefer the 'cocooned' feeling that they get from sitting in a small litter tray. Providing an extra litter tray containing bedding might help.

Another issue is that litter trays provided in practice, because of space restrictions, are often too small for most cats to use comfortably, and the amount of litter substrate in the trays is very often not deep enough. Plus, cats can be reluctant to use a litter tray if they feel threatened or vulnerable, which is often the case for cats in a veterinary hospital.

Traditionally we have housed cats in hospital kennels that are fairly small – because cats are a small animal. But this means that they have their food, resting, and elimination areas very close to each other. And although we might be able to provide them with a hiding place where they can rest, there is very rarely sufficient space to also provide them with a separate elimination area, where they can also feel hidden and secure.

**Q. I have been asked to help with a house-soiling case in a multi-cat household where one of the cats has been doing it for a few years. The vets have put her onto amitriptyline but did not do any behaviour modification. If the problem is within the cats in the household and the pharmaceuticals are not helping, is it a problem that isn't going to go away? I have discussed the case with the owners over the telephone and am going for a visit next week.**

**A.** The fact that this case has not improved since one cat has been receiving amitriptyline does not necessarily mean that the problem will not be treatable or improvable. Probably the biggest factor affecting the prognosis is the length of time the problem has been going on for.

The most important thing, as you have already recognised, is to look at the relationships between the cats in the home and to try and ensure the environment meets their needs, that they do not have to compete for resources and can avoid each other if necessary. If there is ongoing tension between the cats in the home it is possible that they are also stressed, even if they are not house-soiling. It is also important to look specifically at the toileting facilities provided by the owner and ensure that these are adequate for all the cats including the one that is currently house-soiling. If this has not already been done it is also important to check that this cat does not have any medical problems that might be contributing to a house-soiling problem.

Amitriptyline is a tricyclic antidepressant that has traditionally been used in the treatment of urinary tract problems such as idiopathic cystitis in cats. However, if effective this is most likely to be due to the reduction of pain, and possibly because it can be mildly sedating. However, it has less effect on serotonin than other drugs such as clomipramine (Clomicalm) or SSRIs such as fluoxetine, so it is less effective at reducing anxiety. If the house-soiling problem appears to be caused or exacerbated by chronic stress and environmental management strategies are not sufficient to reduce this then it may be worth discussing a change of medication with the vet, ideally to a drug that increases serotonin more effectively. However, it is important to be aware that none of these drugs are licensed for use in cats in the UK.

**Q. Why might a cat that has always eliminated outdoors, suddenly start to urinate or defecate in the house?**

**A.** There can any number of reasons; for example:

- Anything that has caused the cat to feel frightened or threatened when eliminating or attempting to approach its preferred elimination areas e.g.
  - Conflict with neighbouring cats
  - Being chased by a dog
  - Building work
  - Sudden loud noises – e.g. thunder or fireworks
  - Medical issues (see also below) that might reduce the cat's ability to escape or find safety. Or that could cause pain or discomfort when attempting to eliminate.

- Anything that creates difficulty in accessing a preferred outdoor elimination area e.g.
  - Physical barriers – building work etc.
  - Reduced mobility or pain
  - Cognitive or sensory decline or dysfunction
- Anything that can make it unpleasant for the cat to eliminate outdoors e.g.
  - Persistent bad weather – wind, rain, snow etc.

If a cat does start to eliminate in the house, the first thing to do is to provide a least one indoor litter tray, and then begin to investigate the possible reasons for the change in behaviour.

#### **Q. Why might a cat urinate or defecate in the bath?**

**A.** There is a theory that the scent from the plug hole or the scent of soap etc can attract a cat to use a bath as a litter tray. However, in most cases there also seems to be conflict or other stressors within the home and I expect that the main reason is that the sides of the bath provide the cat with an area where it feels safe and enclosed.

In such cases it is best to provide the cat with at least one high-sided litter tray (as described previously see Q.4) in a suitable location. Then aim to identify and address the underlying stressors.

#### **Q. What is your first choice for drugs in a multi cat household where fear or anxiety are underlying the problem behaviour**

**A.** Drugs would not be my first consideration in this type of case. It is important to assess the relationship between the cats and then try and ensure the environment and resource provision are as good as they can be to meet the needs of the individual cats and that any specific stress triggers are minimised. Doing this will often be enough to reduce tension between cats, and if so medication will not be needed. Conversely, if a cat remains very highly stressed living in a home with other cats despite making as many improvements to the environment and resource provision as possible, or if it is just not possible to improve these sufficiently to meet the needs of all the cats it may be better to consider rehoming that cat rather than using medication.

I would usually only use medication in cases where I feel there is a reasonable likelihood of the cats being able to live together happily long-term, but where one or both cats might need some extra support to reduce stress in the short to medium term until the effect of the other changes becomes apparent. This might include where there has been a relationship breakdown between cats that have previously lived together happily, as long as the trigger(s) for the relationship breakdown have been addressed, or where environmental factors have contributed to tension and these can be identified and addressed.

The main choices for longer-term medication to reduce fear and/or anxiety in cats are clomipramine (Clomicalm), fluoxetine and buspirone (Buspar). None of these are licensed for use in cats in the UK. Studies have suggested that Clomicalm and fluoxetine are equally effective at improving house-soiling associated with stress in cats, so the choice may be influenced by whether the owner will find it easier to get their cat to take a tablet (Clomicalm) or liquid (fluoxetine). However, these studies also demonstrated that house-soiling recurred in a significant proportion of cats when the medication was withdrawn, which outlines the importance of addressing the underlying reasons for the behaviour in addition to using medication. Buspar can be particularly useful for cats that are very fearful as it tends to increase general confidence and social interaction in addition to reducing fearfulness and anxiety. It can help to increase confidence in a cat that has been bullied or otherwise frightened by another cat in the home, as long as the other cat is no longer bullying because its needs are being met and the environment and resource provision have been optimised.

**Q. I heard a vet behaviourist discussing the use of SSRIs for house-soiling, but it was advised to avoid the use of paroxetine because it might increase the risk of causing blockage in male cats. Is there any evidence for this?**

**A.** This is a slightly difficult question to answer because there is some contradictory information about the effects of various antidepressants on bladder function and the risk of causing blockages in male cats. The drugs that are most likely to have negative effects on bladder function are those that have anticholinergic side-effects (i.e. block Acetylcholine receptors) in addition to their effects on other neurotransmitters such as serotonin and noradrenaline. This applies particularly to the Tricyclic Antidepressants amitriptyline and to a slightly lesser extent clomipramine. However, some of the SSRIs also have anti-cholinergic side effects, and paroxetine has more significant anticholinergic side effects than other more commonly used SSRIs such as fluoxetine, although still less than clomipramine. Anticholinergic effects include a reduction in contractility of the smooth muscle of the bladder which can potentially result in urinary retention. I found a few published reports of urinary retention occurring in cats treated with clomipramine and amitriptyline, but I cannot find any specific reports of urinary retention occurring after the use of paroxetine, although this has certainly been reported in people. However, to my knowledge paroxetine is not widely used in cats, in the UK anyway. Urinary retention does not appear to be a common side effect of any of these drugs but owners of cats on these medications should routinely be warned to monitor their cat's urination and to contact their vet if they suspect there might be a problem. Conversely, urethral spasm/urinary blockage can occur in cats with Feline Idiopathic Cystitis, and episodes are generally triggered by stress. In cats with severe recurrent episodes of FIC where environmental management alone is not sufficient to prevent these episodes these cats might actually benefit from treatment with medication that helps reduce stress such as clomipramine or fluoxetine for example, alongside the other stress-reducing, environmental management and LUTD- management strategies.

**Q. Can vinegar be used to clean urine marks?**

**A.** The recommended way to clean urine marks is as follows:

1. Include a margin of approximately 2 inches around the site that you can see. In cases of urine marking (spraying) also be aware that urine can run down a vertical surface onto the horizontal surface underneath, so ensure that this area is included in the cleaning process.
2. Wash with plain water, and pat dry with kitchen paper
3. Wash with a proprietary odour elimination product or a 10-20% solution of a biological (enzymatic) washing detergent, then rinse (if using washing detergent) and pat dry.
4. Wipe or lightly spray over with surgical spirit\* and allow to dry naturally.

\*the idea at this stage is to use something that cleans and then evaporates. I recommend surgical spirit, but vinegar could be used, but it smells much stronger and may not be so effective. It is also very unlikely to be effective if used on its own without prior cleaning with water and an enzymatic (odour elimination) cleaning solution. It is also very important, whatever cleaning method is used, to test a small area of the surface to be cleaned first.

**Q. Can Feliway be useful in helping to resolve house soiling problems?**

**A.** Installing a Feliway Classic diffuser near to a litter tray can help to make the area and the litter tray feel more secure for a cat. This can be particularly useful in cases where the reasons for a previous aversion to using a litter tray has been correctly identified and addressed, but the cat is still wary or reluctant to use the litter tray.

Installing Feliway Classic diffusers can also be useful where stress might be a contributory factor to indoor elimination problems and in cases of indoor urine marking, where stress appears to be the most common reason for the behaviour in neutered pet cats.

In multi-cat households where conflict between the cats might be contributing to house-soiling issues, then installing a Feliway Friends diffuser in the area where both cats are most likely to rest together might also help (and it is perfectly OK to use both Feliway Friends and Feliway Classic together). However, although pheromonatherapy can be useful to assist behaviour therapy, it is ***always*** essential that any underlying and/or contributory factor are correctly identified and addressed.