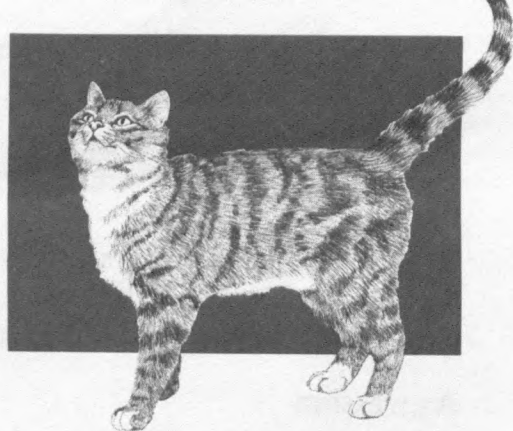

Perspectives On Cats

*A Newsletter for Cat Fanciers
From The Cornell Feline Health Center*

Spring 1996



When Your Cat Misbehaves

The natural lifestyle of the cat is characterized by low population density, regular scheduling of activities, infrequent interaction between adult cats, defined territories, and a dominance hierarchy with only one reproductively-active male in each society. Obviously, many households depart from some or even all of these conditions, thus causing a wide range of social-stress symptoms. The signs will depend on the individual cat and situation and may include house soiling, aggression, withdrawal, household destruction, and changes in eating and grooming habits. Such responses are considered behavior problems by owners.

Soiling

Failure to use the litter box, or house soiling, is the most common behavior problem of cats. It may be litter aversion, a scent-marking activity, or a medical problem. Feline lower urinary tract disease (FLUTD)—formerly known as feline urologic syndrome (FUS)—accounts for a significant number of house-soiling cases. Signs of FLUTD include inappropriate urination and passing of bloody urine. Litter box aversion results from association with painful

urination or an urgency to urinate. FLUTD can be a life-threatening problem and medical treatment from a veterinarian should be obtained.

Scent marking or spraying is performed as the cat stands facing away from its target, quivering its tail. The target is usually a vertical object such as a window, cabinet or stereo. Uncastrated males mark their territories by urine spraying. Unspayed females may spray when they are in heat. Neutering will solve most spraying problems. However, cats of either sex may spray if there are too many cats in the household. If reducing the number of cats in the household is not possible, treatment with a psycho-active medication may be necessary. Inappropriate defecation or nonspraying urination may have the same motivations.

In contrast to spraying, urination or defecation is performed in a squatting position. The house soiling cat usually chooses rugs, bathtubs, beds, basement floors or other horizontal surfaces. Solving the problem begins with analyzing the location of the elimination. Elimination near the box indicates the litter or box is rejected, whereas elimination elsewhere is probably a preference for the location or substrate. Stress, especially caused by additional animals or people in the household, causes some cats to become more fastidious about their litter. They will also do the same if their litter box is cleaned too infrequently. A first step might be cleaning litter boxes daily instead of weekly. Changing brands of litter, too little litter in the box, overuse of deodorizers, or a poor box

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location can also lead to house soiling. More boxes, larger boxes, fine-grained clumping litter, and frequent cleaning solve most soiling problems.

Aggression

Feline aggression directed towards people is either predatory/playful or irritable. Stalking and pouncing on a person's feet or ankles is typical of predatory aggression. If the cat is young, the aggression is probably play oriented. In these cases, the bite is usually inhibited. However, if the owner has not corrected the cat for playing too roughly, it may not have learned to inhibit its bite. Playful aggression is best redirected towards swinging toys. Irritable aggression usually occurs when the cat is being stroked too roughly or excessively. Petting the cat more gently and for shorter times should resolve this problem.

Redirected aggression occurs when a cat sees another cat but cannot reach it and attacks the owner or another cat in the household instead. To treat redirected aggression, remove the cat to a quiet dark

room and isolate him until he is calm. Don't try to handle the cat—push it with a cardboard shield to maneuver it into a quiet room. Try to prevent visual contact with strange cats—the usual cause of redirected aggression.

Aggression among cats in the same household is the most common feline aggression problem. Introduction of a new adult cat will usually provoke aggression. However, aggression can also occur between cats that had lived peacefully together for years. Redirected aggression is a frequent cause. Sometimes a physical change, or a change in odor can precipitate an attack. Gradual reintroduction of the cat, with or without psychotropic medications, is necessary.

Destructive Behavior

Clawing and Scratching. Clawing or scratching behavior is a grooming behavior that loosens old layers of the claw. It may also be a form of marking behavior. Whatever the motivation for scratching, it is often an undesirable behavior especially if the new sofa or draperies become a scratching site.

Scratching habits can be prevented from developing. If kittens are encouraged to use a scratching post, they usually will not abuse furniture. A good scratching post should have loosely woven material to allow the cat to hook its claws in the fabric. Hemp is a preferred scratching material. Cats scratch more often when they awaken and when greeting a returning owner. Therefore, locate the post near the cat's usual sleeping place and the front door. Carpeted climbing trees also help. The best teacher of a kitten is its mother, so choose kittens from queens that use a scratching post. If destructive clawing persists, discuss other solutions with your veterinarian such as the application of vinyl nail caps, or as a last option surgical procedures such as tendectomy or declawing.

Wool chewing. Wool chewing or sucking is a behavior problem that occurs with greater frequency in Siamese or Burmese cats than in other breeds.

Perspectives On Cats

*A Newsletter for Cat Fanciers
From The Cornell Feline Health Center*

The ultimate purpose of the Cornell Feline Health Center is to improve the health of cats everywhere, by developing methods to prevent or cure feline diseases, and by providing continuing education to veterinarians and cat owners. All contributions are tax-deductible.

Director: Fred W. Scott, D.V.M., Ph.D.
Assistant Director: James R. Richards, D.V.M.
Editor: June E. Tuttle
Administrative Assistants: Gwen Frost
Marsha J. Leonard
Sheryl A. Thomas

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Wool sucking differs from non-nutritive suckling that many early weaned kittens will perform. Early weaning may or may not cause wool chewing. There is no evidence of a nutritional deficiency, but it could be a craving for fiber or indigestible roughage. Thus, feeding a high-fiber diet, providing safe plants and strips of tough meat for the cat to chew are helpful aids in redirecting the cat's behavior.

Wool chewing is usually presented as a problem when the cat is an adult. The behavior is characterized by chewing with the molars. The material chewed is usually wool, but in the absence of wool the cat will generalize to other materials including upholstery. The behavior is sporadic, but large holes can be produced in a matter of minutes. Treating the wool object with cologne and a solution of hot pepper sauce will help teach the cat not to chew the item. The cat associates the smell of the cologne with the unpleasant taste and avoids objects that smell of the cologne.

Plant Eating. Cats frequently eat grass. Therefore, it is not surprising that cats may eat house plants. Plant eating can have serious consequences to the cat because many house plants are poisonous. The best solution is to provide green plants that are safe for cats to eat. Check local pet stores to purchase safe edible plants for your cat. The cat needs to learn to discriminate edible from nonedible plants. A water squirt gun is an effective aid in the discrimination process. Another method is to spray the leaves of the plant with a hot pepper solution.

Prevention

Preventing problems is often the easiest approach. Several problems, such as house soiling and aggression, occur more frequently with intact male cats. Also, castrated males do not roam nearly as far, thus limiting their social contacts, fights, and contact with automobiles. Females may be as protective of an area as males. A neutered female will not attract free-roaming males, and there will be fewer fights in the backyard during the breeding season.

If you want to keep several cats in your house, the ideal way is to raise them together as kittens. It is not necessary that they be littermates. An adult cat will be much more likely to accept a kitten as a companion than another adult. Also, an adult of the same sex is more threatening than one of the opposite sex.

Gradually introduce a new cat to an established household. First, confine it to a room for the first few days, then to a cage in the doorway of the room. The resident cat(s) may investigate for another few days before allowing direct contact between the cats. The new cat should continue to have a room or cage to which it may retreat.

Resident cats which are especially attached to people should receive extra attention during this period. Some of the anxiety may be alleviated by giving the cat an antianxiety medication. However, if the resident cat displays persistent aggression, house soiling, or withdrawal, it might be advisable not to keep the second cat. While two cats may become attached to one another, there is no apparent benefit to keeping many cats in one house. In fact, the stress produced by overcrowding may be detrimental to them.

Coping with Change

Changes in daily routine or moving are stressful situations for cats. Cats may require extra attention from the owners during the changeover and, if possible, the change should be made gradually. There are many anecdotal accounts of cats returning to homes that are hundreds of miles from their owner's new residence. Whether true or false, cats do show remarkable ties to their home range, starting when they are quite young.

Adjusting a cat to a new home begins by confining it for at least one week in a comfortable, safe area (room or cage). Then allow the cat to explore the rest of the house.

Behavior Modification Techniques

Realistically, problems may be beyond the preven-

tion stage, and need treatment. There are different methods that can be used to help cats learn more acceptable behavior patterns. The method chosen should be appropriate for the problem you are trying to correct.

Aversion uses an obnoxious stimulus (e. g. hot pepper sauce or strong perfume) to teach avoidance. It is effective for oral behavior problems such as wool sucking or plant eating.

Desensitization works well for managing fear or anxiety. First expose the cat to nonfearful stimuli and then gradually increase the intensity of the stimuli over time. For extreme cases, the use of antianxiety medications are helpful in the initial desensitization process.

Punishment for misbehavior is only effective when the cat is caught in the act. Cats are unable to associate their actions with punishment unless the two occur within minutes of one another. Cats differ from other species in the type of punishment that is most effective to change behavior. The cat must not associate the owner with the action, otherwise the cat learns to avoid the behavior only in the owner's presence. The most effective techniques are using a water squirt gun or throwing a rattle nearby. The cat does not associate these punishments with the owner, but rather with the location or their behavior.

Rewards are used for natural behavior that resembles behavior ultimately desired. Rewards may be in the form of food treats or stroking the cat.

Drugs

The veterinarian may prescribe antianxiety medications, hormone treatments or mild tranquilizers. These drugs help reduce aggression, eliminate territorial marking, and decrease fear during a cat's adjustment to the changes in its environment or routine. Drug therapy has successfully stopped spraying habits when it persisted after castration. However, the aim of the owner and the veterinarian should be to remove the cause of the stress.

Poorly socialized animals may never overcome their fears. Antianxiety medications may help a timid cat through the adjustment period. Extra attention from the owner is important during times of stress.

Adjustment

If the stress is inside the household, expose the cat to the stimulus slowly for increasing time periods. For example, a new member of the household may begin calmly talking to the cat for short time periods, several times a day. Finally, the person can progress to petting and holding the cat. Of course, this only is successful if the person really does want to become friendly with the cat. If the problem is a dog, the dog must simultaneously receive some social training. An aggressive cat being introduced can be calmed with medication during this period.

Caging a cat might be a useful addition to therapy. Separating two aggressive cats will mechanically accomplish a disruption of the behaviors associated with the social problem. The behavioral methods already discussed may then be started after several days or a week.

With patience and an understanding of your cat's needs, you and your veterinarian can work together and restore harmony in the home.

Mews Briefs

Solving Feline Behavior Problems Seminar

Cornell University is sponsoring a two-day seminar taught by faculty from the College of Veterinary Medicine on May 11-12, 1996. For details call (607) 255-7259; fax: (607) 255-8942; or e-mail: sp@sce.cornell.edu.

Feline Health Center's WWW Home Page

The Cornell Feline Health Center's WWW home page is currently under construction and should be available on the Internet in April.

The address is: <http://web.vet.cornell.edu/public/fhc/FelineHealth.html>.



Q. We have a 16-year-old spayed female cat that was diagnosed with hyperactive thyroid over a year ago. Fortunately, she responded very well to therapy; however, the blood test showed that she has stressed kidneys and our veterinarian prescribed Hill's Prescription k/d diet. She simply refuses to eat k/d. We have tried adding clam and chicken juices to the food, but with no success. Our veterinarian also gave me a recipe to try that consisted mostly of rice and liver, but again she will not eat. Since this is a common problem among not only older cats but cats in general, is there another brand or a different flavor perhaps that cats like?—C.C., New York

A. Loss of appetite (anorexia) frequently accompanies almost any feline illness or debility, not just kidney disease. The most confounding situations to confront veterinarians and cat owners alike is the failure of cats to eat when they are not feeling well.

So how do veterinarians circumvent the problem? For short-term management, such as after an injury or an illness expected to last for less than a week or so, a number of options are available. Appetite stimulants have sometimes been hailed as the solution to feline anorexia, but few, if any of them, really stimulate cats to eat enough to meet their nutritional needs. Hand-feeding, force-feeding, and tube-feeding (with small-diameter tubes entering through the nose, or larger-diameter tubes entering through the pharynx or into the stomach itself) are better options if aggressive support is needed for several days. If necessary, stomach tubes can provide support for several months or longer.

For chronic maladies (like chronic renal failure, congestive heart failure, obesity, or diabetes mellitus) that require long-term dietary management, the approach is obviously quite different. One method is

to simply try a different commercial formulation. Although Hill's Prescription k/d Diet is usually fairly well accepted by cats, there are other commercial products now available by prescription that seek to accomplish the same dietary objectives; one of these may be more tempting to your cat's palate. And as you have mentioned, home-cooked diets offer a good, although certainly a less convenient alternative. If a canned or home-prepared diet is used, warming it to body temperature in a microwave oven releases appetite-stimulating aromas.

Regardless of which method is tried, it's very important not to abruptly change diets. Even cats that are perfectly healthy sometimes resist a rapid change of diet; the reluctance is even more pronounced if the appetite is diminished already. The solution? Make the change gradually, mixing in a very small amount of the new diet and slowly increasing the proportion over a week or two. This way, cats become accustomed to the new taste. There are a few very recalcitrant cats that absolutely refuse to change diets. On occasion, veterinarians are forced into conceding the battle, realizing that even though the new diet may be best for the condition, not eating anything at all is more harmful than eating a less-than-ideal diet for the condition.

Q. My cat, George, lives in a multicat household but has always been isolated from my other cats because he has feline leukemia virus (FeLV). I want to know how safe this situation is for my other cats—all have tested negative and receive annual vaccinations against feline leukemia. How effective is the vaccine? How long does this virus live in the air? Could I transmit this virus on my clothes to my healthy cats? Could my healthy cats develop a related disease,

(continued on page 8)

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Mail Bag (continued from page 5)

such as cancer, from George without actually getting feline leukemia? George is now four years old (tested positive at 5 months old). What are the chances that George could simply be a carrier and never have symptoms of the disease?—M.S., Michigan

A. If George can be kept isolated as far as possible from your other cats, there is a minimal risk of transmission of FeLV to them. In a multiple-cat household, the major means of spreading the virus from cat-to-cat is by mutual grooming or biting, and sharing of litter boxes, feeding and water dishes. Keeping him in a separate part of the house should reduce the likelihood of any of these virus-to-cat encounters. Transmission of the virus through the air, such as may happen if an infected cat sneezes, is not felt to be a concern unless the cat sneezes directly into the face of another. Carrying the virus from George's part of the house into the other on your shoes or clothing is not a serious concern either, but to be on the safe side, I recommend having a different pair of shoes that can be slipped on when you're in George's environment, and an apron or smock that's worn only when you're with him. Because the virus is easily inactivated with disinfectants or household detergents, simply wash your hands and arms after taking care of George. Another thing: it's best

to take care of your other cats' daily needs first (feeding, watering, and tending to the litter boxes), then George's. In this way, the chance of carrying viruses to your uninfected cats is reduced even more.

I agree with your decision to vaccinate your other cats. Their efficacy ranges from 50 percent to 90 percent, but vaccination does give that extra assurance of protection if your cats are ever exposed. Feline leukemia virus vaccines don't protect against transient infection, and there's good evidence that cats who are only transiently infected may at some future time develop an FeLV-related disease. However, if your cats never are infected, even transiently, then they will never develop an FeLV-related disease.

The long-term prognosis for cats that are persistently infected with FeLV is not good: early studies show that about 85 percent of cats don't survive longer than three and a half years. Cats that receive excellent care and regular veterinary checkups have the potential to live much longer, but some unfortunate cats will not, even with the best of care.

Have a question? Send it to POC Mail Bag, Cornell Feline Health Center, T7018, Ithaca, NY 14853-6401.



Cornell Feline Health Center
Cornell University
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Ithaca, New York 14853