

# Senior Cats: Common Behavior Changes

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As cats become older, they may be more apt to change their behavior or develop certain behavioral problems. With the correct diagnosis and treatment, many of these behavioral problems can be resolved. It may take some patience on your part, but your longtime feline friend is worth it!

## Inappropriate elimination

Inappropriate elimination (urinating or defecating outside of the litter box, and/or [spraying](#)) is the most common behavior problem of older cats. There are numerous causes for this behavior, many of them medical, so a cat who has inappropriate elimination should be examined by a veterinarian. Laboratory tests will need to be performed in most cases.

Medical conditions, which result in an increased frequency of urination or defecation may be the underlying cause for this behavior problem. These conditions include: [colitis](#), [inflammatory bowel disease](#), [diabetes mellitus](#), [hyperthyroidism](#), kidney or liver disease, and [feline lower urinary tract disease](#) (FLUTD). Medical conditions, which cause pain urinating or defecating, or make it difficult for the cat to get in and out of the litter box, may also result in inappropriate elimination. Such conditions include [arthritis](#), FLUTD, [anal sac disease](#), loss of vision, and some forms of colitis. Treatment of these medical conditions may help to resolve this behavioral problem. In addition, using litter boxes with lower sides, placing the litter box in the area in which the cat spends the most time, and increasing the number of litter boxes may be helpful.

Stress can be a major cause of inappropriate elimination in cats of all ages. Older cats may not be able to handle stressors as well as younger cats. Stressors such as moving, changes in routine, or changes in the makeup of the family can result in inappropriate elimination. Reducing these stressors or decreasing their impact on the household will benefit your cat (and probably you, too). For instance, when moving, attempt to keep the cat in a quiet portion of the home when packing and during the actual moving day. At the new residence, confine your cat to a quiet room at first (probably a bedroom), placing her food, water, litter box, and favorite sleeping material (bed, sweatshirt, etc.) in the room. Spend time with her in that room and feed her and clean the litter box at the usual time. Gradually let her become accustomed to the rest of the house.



There is a product called 'Feliway,' which was designed to help reduce anxiety in cats, and thus decrease spraying or urinating inappropriately. Feliway contains pheromones from the cat's face. Pheromones are chemicals, which are used to communicate with other members of the same species. You may notice your cat rubs her face and chin on vertical surfaces. She is leaving a scent there, which contains these pheromones. The pheromones from the face have a calming effect on other cats. When Feliway is sprayed onto multiple vertical surfaces which your cat may spray, the cat receives this calming effect and in many cases spraying will be reduced.

Cats of all ages may develop an aversion to the litter box or substrate (material inside of the litter box). Trying different types of litter including clumping litter, sand, newspaper, and no litter are things that could be helpful.

Other tips on controlling inappropriate elimination and spraying include using enzyme cleaners to clean areas, which have been soiled with urine or feces, feeding the cat in the area in which she is inappropriately eliminating, and using upside down carpet runners (the ones with the spikes on the bottom), double-sided tape, motion detectors, pet repellents, or scat mats to limit her access to the area where she inappropriately eliminates.

## Aggression

Cats may become aggressive toward people or toward other animals in the household. Again, this aggression may be the result of a medical problem such as one causing pain (arthritis), vision or hearing loss, which results in the cat being easily startled, or diseases having direct effects on the nervous system. As with inappropriate elimination, stresses such as moving can cause irritability and subsequent aggression in some cats. A combination of counter-conditioning (teaching the cat a different response when exposed to a certain stimuli), desensitization (gradually reintroducing the cat to the stimuli), medical therapy, and Feliway may help change the cat's behavior. Consult your veterinarian and an animal behaviorist if your older cat is becoming aggressive.

## Fear/anxiety

As with the other behavioral problems discussed above, loss of hearing or vision, stress, pain, and neurologic disease can contribute to fear or anxiety in a cat. Treatment includes determining, if possible, the cause of the fear and reducing it, providing appropriate therapy for any medical condition, and prescribing various anti-anxiety medications.

## Change in activity patterns

For their entire life, some cats tend to be active during the night, keeping us awake, and then they go into sound sleep as soon as we get up. Some older cats will develop this altered sleep-awake cycle, as well. Pain, the need to urinate or defecate more often, the loss of vision or hearing, changes in appetite, and neurologic conditions can contribute to this behavior. Playing or grooming your cat prior to bedtime may help her to sleep. Experiment with changing feeding times to see if that makes a difference. You may not be able to change the cycle, so in those cases, you may want to keep the cat out of the bedrooms.

If in addition to staying awake at night, the cat vocalizes as well, you may need to use something aversive to stop the

vocalizing. 'Remote correction,' such as throwing a pop can containing a few coins or pebbles toward the cat (not at the cat!), may startle her and stop her from vocalizing. She should not associate you with the correction or she may increase her vocalization just to get your attention. In some instances, medications may be used in an attempt to change the sleep-awake cycle.

#### Summary

Many of the behavioral changes we see in older cats can be due to medical conditions. If your cat's behavior is changing, have your cat examined by a veterinarian. Your older cat is more easily stressed, so attempt to reduce stress by making any necessary changes in routine gradual, and decreasing the exposure of your cat to stressors. With patience, understanding, and treatments recommended by your veterinarian, you can help make your cat's older years a quality time for you and her.