

Fecal Incontinence in Cats

Causes of this involuntary loss of control range from sphincter weakness to a neurologic issue

Cleaning up after your cat is part of the deal you made when you brought him home. You do it out of love and duty, but let's be real. It's not the best thing about having a cat even when the poop is in the litterbox. Now imagine it's outside the box. Of course, that's when you lie awake at night praying he never gets diarrhea.

Fecal incontinence, defined as the inability to control defecation, results in involuntary passage of feces. Fortunately, it is not a common problem in cats. Before discussing why it happens, it is helpful to first understand what has to happen for a normal voluntary bowel movement to take place.

When the rectum fills with feces, rectal nerves send a message to the brain saying, "I need to go." If it's not the appropriate time or place to go, the brain sends a message to the nerves controlling the muscles of the anal sphincter saying, "You need to wait."

This results in tightening of the sphincter to hold the feces in. Once the appropriate time and place has been reached, the brain sends an OK to the

anal sphincter, which relaxes, and a normal bowel movement occurs.

When Things Go Wrong

As you can see, there are a lot of places where things can go wrong, from the brain to the anal sphincter. Sometimes the cause of fecal incontinence is neurologic, but there are non-neurologic causes as well. Abnormalities of or damage to the colon, rectum, or anus can cause non-neurologic incontinence.

Examples of physical reasons for fecal incontinence include trauma, prior surgery, rectal prolapse (protrusion of the rectum through the anus), and perineal hernias. Severe diarrhea, for whatever reason, can cause "urge" incontinence, where the need to go overwhelms the ability to control it. Simply resolving the diarrhea eliminates the incontinence in these cases.

In geriatric cats, sometimes it is a combination of ailments that results in dropping stool around the house. Pain from arthritis or other conditions can make it difficult to posture long enough for a full bowel movement in the box.

Generalized muscle loss weakens the voluntary muscles of the anal sphincter, making geriatric cats less able to contain any stool left behind in the rectum.

Cognitive impairment can play a role, as can visual impairment when it comes to finding the box. See our sidebar for things you can do to help your geriatric cat keep stool in the box.

Neurologic Causes

Neurologic causes that originate in the brain or spinal cord (upper motor neuron disease)

Helping Geriatric Cats

If your cat suffers from arthritis, talk to your veterinarian about instituting a pain management protocol. This might include medications like gabapentin, a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID), opioid medication, Solensia (the new once-a-month injectable treatment for arthritis pain), acupuncture, and/or laser therapy.

Use a litterbox with low sides for ease of getting in and out. Larger boxes are more inviting as well. Having a litterbox on every floor of your home is a good idea so your geriatric cat doesn't have to travel far when the urge to go occurs.

Keep the pathways to the box well-lit at night. This is easy to do with plug-in night lights.

require advanced imaging like CT or MRI for diagnosis, which can be expensive but gives your veterinarian important information. If the lesions are amenable to surgery, the incontinence can potentially be cured.

Neurologic lesions that occur lower down near the pelvic area (lower motor neuron disease) carry a worse prognosis. These are almost always caused by trauma, like being hit by a car and suffering pelvic fractures or a tail-pull injury, which can occur when a cat scoots in front of a motor vehicle and gets her tail trapped by a tire, resulting in stretching or tearing of the nerves at the base of the tail.

One exception to the "almost always caused by trauma" statement is the Manx cat, which has a genetically mediated malformation in the region of the tail that can lead to fecal incontinence. Another exception is fecal incontinence due to inadvertent injury to perineal nerves during surgery for male cats that suffer from repeated urinary blockages.

Veterinary Care

If you find pieces of feces around the house, the first thing your veterinarian needs to determine is whether it is truly fecal incontinence, a behavior issue (inappropriate elimination), or whether it is due to small, ineffective bowel movements secondary to constipation. These distinctions can usually be made

Give a Cat a Chance

While not for everyone, caring for a cat with fecal incontinence can be a rewarding experience. You are providing a loving home and good care for a pet whose chances of being adopted into another home are usually very low. And the incontinence is not the cat's fault.



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with a careful history and a thorough physical examination.

After a full physical exam (including a digital rectal exam to check for tumors, polyps, or anal-sac issues) and thorough neurologic exam, further diagnostics may be recommended depending upon preliminary findings.

Blood tests, fecal tests, X-rays, and abdominal ultrasound may be

suggested. If a non-neurologic condition is diagnosed and can be treated, the incontinence or upper motor neuron disease should resolve.

Unfortunately, there is usually no effective treatment for fecal incontinence caused by lower motor neuron disease.

Lower motor neuron fecal incontinence due to trauma may resolve with time, as nerve tissue has the ability to heal. Healing takes many months, but if you can provide the extra care your kitty needs in the meantime, there is a chance that he or she may regain control. Note: Lower motor neuron fecal incontinence is often accompanied by urinary tract issues. ■



Cleanup is no fun for anyone, but there are often treatments once the cause is determined.

What You Can Do

Nutritional Considerations

When managing a cat with fecal incontinence, what you feed can make a difference. “A nutritional approach, while certainly not a cure, is probably the best way to help,” says Dr. Joseph Wakshlag, board-certified veterinary nutritionist and chief of nutrition at Cornell’s College of Veterinary College. “**Low residue formulas** usually work best, as they result in smaller stools. Less coming out the back means less to clean up.”

Low residue diets are generally low in fiber, resulting in reduced fecal volume. They also usually contain highly digestible proteins, with moderate amounts of highly digestible fats and carbohydrates. Royal Canin, Hill’s, and Purina all make prescription low residue foods. Talk to your veterinarian about the best choice for your cat.

Hygiene Helps

Hygiene is important for your incontinent cat’s health. Check daily for fecal matter stuck in the perineal area. Shaving long-haired cats back there helps a lot. **Use baby wipes** for local cleansing as needed. Sometimes a bath may become necessary.

Diapers are generally not well-tolerated by cats, and they increase the likelihood of skin irritation or infection.

Be sure to keep an **invitingly clean litterbox** available, even if the stool isn’t making it in there. Keep clean up products and pet odor eliminators in easily accessible places. Consider having more than one litterbox available, set in different locations in your home.

Suspected Poisoning

Whether a toxin is ingested or topical, your immediate reaction is critical to her survival

If you think your cat has gotten into something toxic, there are steps for you to take immediately, including calling your veterinarian or animal poison control. If possible, have one person start to treat the cat as described in this article while the other makes the call. Some substances are caustic to the skin itself, while others are only toxic if your cat licks them off and ingests them, but you must find out for certain. Assume it’s a toxin until you know otherwise.

Be prepared to provide accurate information to your veterinarian or poison control. Know your cat’s weight. What might not be a problem for a 12-lb mature cat could be toxic to a 3-lb kitten.

If you know what the product was, have the packaging handy when you call to answer questions.

Permethrins

If your cat has something on her hair, such as the dog’s spot flea/tick preventative, start with a bath with Dawn dish soap. Yes, use Dawn because it’s effective and safe at removing toxins from the fur and skin of animals exposed to a wide variety of hazardous substances.

Permethrin, a chemical contained in various flea and tick products for dogs, is potentially lethal for cats. Never use a canine parasite control product on your cat, no matter what it is. Do not allow your cats to mingle with your

dogs for 72 hours after application of one of these products, as even contact with the “greasy spot” between your dog’s shoulder blades can make your cat deathly ill.

Foods

A number of human foods, including grapes, garlic, onions, and chocolate, can be toxic to cats if ingested in sufficient quantities.



Cats do strange things, but a cat who flops down for no apparent reason and then cannot get up or gets up and is unsteady on her feet is a poisoning suspect.

Xylitol

This sweetener commonly found in chewing gum and human foods is toxic to cats. If you find chewing gum containing xylitol on your cat’s fur, some vegetable oil can loosen the offending substance so you can remove it, or cut it