Is your cat thinking outside the box?
By Beth Weil

On any given day, about a third of the calls to Marin Humane's cat behavior advice line involve cats "thinking outside the box." That is, relieving themselves in the wrong place.

Fortunately, the vast majority of these cases can easily be solved.

First, a visit to your veterinarian is in order. Although not common, cats do get urinary tract infections. If you've ever had one of these, you know how uncomfortable they make you feel. Cats can also develop crystals in their urine, and for male cats, this can quickly become life-threatening. This is a problem that can readily be treated once noticed. Diarrhea or constipation can also affect cats' litter box habits. Kitties have limited ways of letting us know that something isn't right, and in their minds, if it hurts to pee or poop in the litter box, they're going to try somewhere else.

If your kitty gets a clean bill of health, consider your litter box. Due to Marin's coyote population, many cats are rightfully kept indoors. Coyotes are out day and night and cats are an easy target, especially older ones. Contrary to popular belief, cats don't need to go outside to be happy. They don't read travel blogs and don't know what they're missing. Plus, these days there are many ways to enrich a kitty's environment indoors. Generally, indoor cats live two to three times longer than cats that go outside.

Sensitive noses

How frequently do you scoop the box? Cats are fastidious creatures with sensitive noses. Humans have about 5 million scent receptors in our noses; cats have 65 million, so our cats find the smell of the litter box gross before we do. Cats generally prefer unscented, clumping litter in an open box. Scooping the litter box twice a day usually provides an acceptably clean box. Boxes do absorb odors with time and harsh cleaning products like bleach add their own unpleasant smells. If your boxes are a few years old, replacing them one box at a time — cats don't like a lot of change at once — is a good idea.

Many people like covered boxes because it keeps the smell inside. Imagine how a porta-potty smells, then consider how it would smell if you had 65 million scent receptors in your nose! If your cat has particularly smelly poop, a diet change might improve the situation. Most cats prefer uncovered boxes because they don't hold the smell in and there are many ways to escape.

Clean and close

Cats like their litter boxes like we like our bathrooms — clean, private, and convenient. The general rule of thumb is one litter box per cat, plus one more. Boxes should be in different rooms, if possible. Some households can successfully have fewer boxes, but if there are issues in your home, having plenty of litter boxes is crucial.

There are a few cats that are so anxious they pee outside of the box but there are medical solutions to successfully treat this, including medications like kitty Prozac. Although there are many options to consider before this, it can resolve the problem when other medical and behavioral options haven't worked.

Learn more at our upcoming Zoom workshop, "Cats 101," at 7 p.m. Thursday. Register at marinhumane.org/oh-behave. And for other kitty conundrums, call 415-506-6284 or email catbehavior@marinhumane.org.

Beth Weil is the feline behavior coordinator at Marin Humane, which contributes Tails of Marin articles and welcomes animal-related questions about the people and animals in our community. Go to marinhumane.org, Twitter.com/marinhumane or email lbloch@marinhumane.org.