

Cats are generally quite fastidious when it comes to grooming and litter box habits. When there is a change in these habits, there is likely some type of problem.

Sterno is a five-year-old male neutered Siamese cat that lives with Kathy in their house in Modesto. Sterno, whose name incidentally comes from his inappropriate ingestion of fondue pot fuel as a kitten, has had no health problems up until recently when he began to defecate outside his litter box. At first, he would go perhaps once a day outside the box and then only a few inches from it. This started about six weeks ago and progressed to the point where he is going in an entirely different room from the room where his box is located. Most recently, he has been going with a greatly increased frequency and often the stool is very loose. Kathy is concerned on several levels, one being the damage incurred by the hardwood floors, but more importantly, she is concerned about Sterno.

A change in litter box habits is most definitely indicative of a problem in cats. Again, they are generally fastidious companions, and when something changes, a reason should be sought. Initially I might have thought that Sterno was showing a behavioral problem by defecating outside his box. Maybe he was not happy about the box. Perhaps it was not being cleaned to his liking. I am putting behavioral problem lower on my diagnostic list primarily because the frequency of defecation and the consistency of the stool have changed. It is now more likely in my mind that there is a disease process at work.

What Kathy is describing is termed diarrhea. An important point to understand is that diarrhea is not always represented by loose stool. The term is also used in cases of excess stool production even in a normal formed state. In Sterno's case, we have increased production and decreased form. I realize this may be more than some of you might want to know when it comes to stool production but for those inquiring minds.....Since stool is the product of the digestive tract, and Sterno is producing abnormal stool with an increased frequency, he must be having a problem with his digestive tract.

As is always the case with any medical problem, a diagnosis is needed to therefore allow a proper course of treatment. Sterno needs a trip to his veterinarian. Kathy should bring a stool sample with her so that it can be processed and examined for possible parasites. There is a chance that Sterno has a type of intestinal parasite that might be causing the changes in his stool. As the population of the parasites increase, so too will his symptoms. This fits with Kathy's description of Sterno's problems.

Sterno will also likely need some radiographs of his abdomen to allow us to look at his digestive tract, his stomach, small and large intestine. Blood work will also be helpful to determine if there might be an organ system problem leading to digestive trouble.

Beyond these tests, it may be necessary to assess his digestive ability. This is an indirect way to discover how his pancreas might be doing. This organ is responsible for production of the digestive enzymes used to breakdown food. Sterno may ultimately need to have his bowel biopsied which allows a microscopic look at the bowel wall. This will show changes consistent with a particular disease process that might be causing his symptoms.

Some combination of diagnostics will be required in order to discover Sterno's problem. With a definitive answer, a treatment and hopefully a cure can be had.