

## LITTER BOX PROBLEMS

The most common reason a cat stops using its litter box is because the litter box is dirty - from the cat's viewpoint, not yours. Cats often react to any type of stress by suddenly urinating or defecating outside the litter box. The stress may be caused by a new cat in the neighborhood; children home on vacation; too many cats in the house; your going away on vacation or a new piece of furniture. Urinary tract problems also cause cats to urinate in places other than the litter box. Any sudden change in elimination habits should be discussed with your veterinarian.

### **Prevent House Soiling**

Until your cat is reliably house trained, she should not have free run of your home. If your cat continually makes mistakes, the behavior can simply become a habit. Punishing a cat after the fact teaches her to be afraid of you. Scolding and then taking the cat to her litter box after she has already eliminated teaches her to associate the litter box with punishment. Basically, punishment doesn't work with cats: prevention and praise for getting it right are the keys to training. When you leave the house for any length of time, your cat should be confined to a single room, preferably one with non-porous floors, such as a kitchen, bathroom, utility room, basement or garage. Provide your cat with a bowl of water and a warm place to sleep at one end of the room and a freshly cleaned litter box at the other end. Until the house soiling has been cured, your cat should have a regular feeding schedule so she will develop a corresponding elimination schedule.

### **The Litter Box**

Your cat does not simply need a litter box - she needs a clean litter box with fresh litter. Your cat will be inhibited from using her litter box if it smells of urine. Think about it from the cat's viewpoint. When she soils your dining room carpet, the area is immediately and thoroughly cleaned. Given the choice between a regularly cleaned place and a litter box that gets changed only once or twice a week, your cat will naturally prefer the carpet.

The litter box must be cleaned daily. The old litter must be discarded and replaced with about 1 1/2 inches of fresh litter. Rinse the litter box thoroughly with water. Adding a little vinegar or lemon juice to the water will help neutralize the odor of the cat's urine. Do not use ammonia; this will make the litter box smell worse.

Make sure that the litter box is in an appropriate place. Cats do not like to soil the areas close to their sleeping or eating areas, so place the litter box some distance away. However, do not place the litter box in an area that is too inaccessible. For example, if the litter box is placed in the bathroom, make sure the door cannot swing shut preventing the cat from getting to it. If the cat is new to your home, she may go into hiding for a few days so place a litter box close to her hiding place.

Some additional factor may be inhibiting your cat from using her litter box, so put down an extra one in a different location. If there is more than one cat in the house, have several litter boxes available.

### **Housetraining Success: Reward for Using the Litter Box**

In order to reward your cat for eliminating in her litter box, you must be there at the time she eliminates. You need to have some idea of when your cat urinates and defecates. Most cats, especially kittens, will eliminate shortly after waking; after eating; and after exercise.

To help you predict when your cat will eliminate, feed her at regular times. If the input is on a regular schedule, the output will follow likewise. Before feeding your cat, spend ten to fifteen minutes playing

with her. Then put down the food, allow her fifteen minutes to eat and then clear up any leftovers. After your cat has eaten, it is time for another gentle play session. Call her to her litter box from a variety of places around your house, especially areas where she has soiled. When your cat gets to the box, scratch the litter to get her interested. Similarly, throughout the day, whenever your cat has been asleep for over two hours, wake her up and call her to the litter box. Encourage your cat to hop into the litter box, praise her when she does so. Even if she does not eliminate, she is learning that the litter box is a great, CLEAN place to be. This is especially important for cats that are now avoiding the litter box because they assume it is always dirty or because they associate it with being punished. If your cat does eliminate, praise her in a gentle voice. Once she has finished, gently stroke her, give her a treat and take the time to tell her how pleased you are.

### **Why does my cat urinate in his litter box but sometimes defecate in my bathtub?**

Cats urinate more frequently than they defecate so it is likely that after your cat has urinated, the litter box is now too dirty and repulsive to use again. He goes in the tub because it's always clean there. Every time your cat soils the tub, you most likely clean it immediately, whereas the litter box may go an entire day before you get around to changing the litter. Given the choice of using a clean tub or dirty litter box, your fastidious cat will naturally use the cleaner area. If you are unable to change the litter box more frequently, get another litter box so at least one of them will be clean enough for him to use. He may continue to soil in the tub out of habit so either place another litter box in the tub, or discourage him from using it altogether by filling the tub with about 1/2 inch of water.

### **My cat prefers to use a back room closet for his litter box. Why won't he use the litter box I have for him in the kitchen?**

Cats like privacy to do their business. Kitchens are usually too busy a place for cats to feel privacy. Cats also don't like to eliminate in their dining area. Even if you don't feed your cat in your kitchen, he probably feels uncomfortable soiling in your dining area. I would take the path of least resistance and place his litter box in the back room closet. If that is not acceptable, then I would use a covered litter box near the closet he prefers.

### **Why is my cat spraying urine on me?**

Urine spraying and marking are social, sexual and territorial behaviors. It's also how cats express extreme emotions such as frustration. Your cat is trying to tell you sometime. Take a good look at what is going on in your home. First, is he neutered? Have there been any social changes, like a roommate moving in or out? Is there a new cat or dog in the neighborhood that he perceives as a rival or threat? Is he being mistreated in any way? Is he healthy? Are you neglecting him? Has your schedule and therefore his routine changed drastically? Are you "seeing another cat" outside your home and bringing back its scent on your clothing? All these things can cause a cat to spray or urine mark. Many people don't realize it, but both male and female cats can urine mark.

### **My 6 week old kitten sleeps in bed with me. Early in the morning she crawls to the end of the bed and wets. Why does she do this and what can I do to stop it?**

I've tried scolding her and washing my bedding to get the smell out. First of all, stop scolding her. It's not her fault. Very young kittens do not have complete bladder control and cannot be expected to "hold" themselves all night. Because she is wetting at the end of the bed, she is trying to get away from her sleeping area and maybe even to her litter box. Your job is to wake up before she awakens and take her to her litter box. Lavishly praise her for using the litter box and then return to bed. Every night extend the time about 15 minutes and eventually she will have enough control to wait until morning. Also, don't let her drink too late at night before bedtime so she retires with an empty bladder.

**My cat urinates just outside her litter box, not even 2 inches away. Why?**

Something is wrong with the litter box. She wants to use it or she wouldn't get so close to it. Usually this happens when the litter box is dirty. Have you recently changed brands of litter? Maybe the litter box is too small to accommodate her. After you have fixed these things, don't forget to praise the daylights out of her when she does use it. And resolve to always keep her litter box spotless. How would you like to use a toilet that was only flushed every other day or so?

**My cat urinates all over the house in very tiny puddles. What should I do?**

See your vet immediately! This is usually a sign of urinary tract problems.

**How can I get my cat to stop using my potted plants as a litter box?**

Make sure you provide your cat with an attractive litter box. By attractive I mean, attractive to the cat. Most cats like litter that feels and smells natural to them - and there are not a lot of things more natural than the dirt in your plants. A lot of fancy litters with all sorts of additives are attractive to us humans but not to our cats. Place your clean litter box filled with a natural litter next to the plant. Cover the top of the plant pot with aluminum foil. Most cats are repelled by the foil and opt for the adjacent box. Then when kitty uses the litter box, tell her how overjoyed you are. Give her a special treat, a massage or a play session. If she wins the jackpot for using the litter box, she will prefer it to the now unattractive plant. When she is regularly using the litter box, gradually move it to a more desirable location.

**My 5 year old neutered male cat just suddenly started spraying my windows! I thought neutered cats won't spray.**

Generally, neutering prevents or stops spraying behavior, but as you have discovered, it's not 100%. When cats spray windows, doorways, fireplaces or any area where outside smells can enter your home, it's a sure sign that something out there is provoking it. It can be a tomcat, a female cat in season, maybe even a dog. In your case, I would close the windows so he can't see out. Maybe even just the sight of a perceived rival or threat is causing him to spray. In addition, place a few drops of your favorite perfume or aftershave by the window to mask out any scent that may be entering through the window. At the same time, your cat needs his confidence and security reinforced. Pay extra special attention to him and under no circumstance reprimand him for his behavior. You will only add stress to stress and worsen the problem. What your cat needs is reassurance and security from you, not your scorn.

**I have 9 cats; nearly all of them urinate everywhere. Anything I can do?**

When you have this many cats, you're asking for trouble. However, I'm sure the pleasure far out weighs the problems or you wouldn't have so many cats. Go back and read about your cats territorial nature and about a cat's social structure and needs. The best advice I can give you is to make sure all the cats are spayed and neutered and have plenty of clean litter boxes in several different locations.

**LITTER BOX TRAINING- PART 1**

Get your kitten off to a good start with an appropriate litter box. Often a plastic box is the most practical and easy to clean. The sides should be low enough that your kitten can easily climb in and out. Place the box in a relatively quiet area of the home with minimal traffic, where the kitten can have some privacy. Be certain the box is easily accessible, perhaps near to the kitten's sleeping area. Some kittens dislike scented litter; it is usually best to start with an unscented clay or clumping litter. If you already have cats at home, provide an additional box for each new cat. Most kittens will automatically use kitty litter in preference to other surfaces, except perhaps for the soil of a potted plant. To prevent mishaps, keep plants out of the kitten's reach or cover the soil with pine cones or decorative rock.

To ensure that your kitten uses its litter box every time, always keep it within eyesight. If it stops playing and begins sniffing around, gently carry it to the litter box. Praise any sniffing or scratching, and give it loads of praise or a small food treat for eliminating. Whenever you are unable to watch the kitten, restrict it to a cat-proofed room with its litter box. Do this for at least the first two weeks, until your kitten is using the box regularly. Keep the box clean so that your cat will return to use it. Once you have found a brand of litter, type of box, and location that your kitten likes, avoid making sudden changes. If you want to change the litter, place the new box with the new litter in the new location, but do not take away the old box until the kitten is using the new litter. Or try mixing the new and old for a few weeks. Since it is important that the kitten feel comfortable around its litter box, try to prevent anything unpleasant from happening when it is near its box. Don't give your cat medicine or scold it when it's near the box. Locate the box in an area free of startling noise, such as a washing machine, radiator, or furnace. If you need to keep your kitten away from children or dogs, use a baby gate with a kitty door.

## **LITTER BOX TRAINING- PART 2**

It doesn't take long for a kitten to develop bad habits, so it is essential that you identify and correct mistakes right away.

### **Causes of House Soiling**

- Change in the brand of litter
- Scented litter additives or the odor of cleansers/deodorants
- The litter box is not cleaned frequently enough
- The litter box was moved to a noisy area
- The kitten was frightened in or near the box
- Medical problems

Most cats will not soil an area where their food or water bowl is placed. To decrease the appeal of the soiled area, place a sheet of plastic carpet runner, two-sided sticky tape, an aversive odor (perfume, deodorized soap), or a motion detector alarm in the area. Never punish a kitten for making a mess outside of its litter box. Punishment usually makes things worse or creates other problems such as fear of the owner, especially if you swat your kitten or rub its nose in the mess. Using a covered litter box can control the odor in the home and be helpful for kittens with poor aim. If your cat refuses to use a covered box, condition it to this setup by placing a large cardboard box over the litter box. Gradually decrease the size of the cardboard box until it approximates the commercial box. Then make the switch.

If your kitten continues to eliminate out of the litter box, take it to your veterinarian for a physical exam, and possibly lab tests to make sure there are no existing medical problems. For example, bladder diseases, diarrhea, and constipation can be irritating for the pet and cause it to avoid the box.

### **Spraying**

As kittens mature, they may begin to spray. Spraying is a form of territorial marking—cats typically will urinate on vertical surfaces such as walls and furniture. Although neutering eliminates most spraying, some neutered cats do spray. If the problem persists after neutering, seek advice from your veterinarian.

## **The Litter Box (Or More Correctly, Litter Boxes) – Your Cat Really Wants You to Read This!**

One of the most important things you can do for your cat is provide a litter box she feels comfortable with and likes to use. You can prevent most litter box problems by understanding your cat's basic nature

and needs. It is far easier and more comfortable to prevent inappropriate urination in cats than to deal with it once it occurs.

Many of us tend to assume that cats use a litter box instinctively. Actually, their instinct is to eliminate in soft soil or sand. The box is a convenience for us humans, and it's really rather amazing that cats are so accommodating about it. A cat's habit of using a litter box is a weak one at best. Realizing this will be a great help to both you and your cat.

Elimination is a basic necessity, but in catdom this function takes on additional meaning. Cats use elimination to establish their territories, and their urge to hide their excrement by covering it stems from a need to avoid predators and control parasites.

Here is a quick summary of important things to know: Detailed information below.

- Number of boxes: One for each cat in the house plus an extra box.
- Location: Safe, quiet location.
- Size: Big enough so Kitty is comfortable
- Litter: Whatever type Kitty likes best.
- Cleanliness: Keep it Clean!!! No one likes a dirty outhouse.

### **Number of Boxes**

The general rule of thumb for the number of litter boxes is one box per cat, plus an extra box.

Translated, this means one cat should have two boxes, two cats should have three boxes, and so forth. If it is possible to have two boxes per cat, even better.

### **Location of Boxes**

It is important to provide your cat with a place to eliminate in a location where she feels safe and comfortable. Choose a peaceful area where she won't be startled and that provides privacy. Ergo, the laundry room where the spin cycle or dryer buzzer can erupt and startle her out of her wits does not classify as safe.

And if Kitty feels unsafe in the area you've provided, she will find somewhere more suitable—which might be in the back of your closet on some soft laundry. Her pleasant experience in your closet may prove far more agreeable than her "scary litter box" and she may make it a habit. She may also find that she likes the feel of laundry or carpet better than the litter and choose this material on a regular basis.

### **Things to consider when choosing a location for the litter boxes.**

#### **1) Think Stress-Free Litter Box.**

If Kitty is part of a multiple cat household, she should have easy access to a private, quiet area that is not a dead end. The back corner of a laundry room with one entry/exit, for example, is a dead end. There should be an escape route available if she feels insecure.

Problem scenario: Marie and Pierre are two cats living in same house. Marie is using her litter box when Pierre decides "Playtime!" Pierre plans a strategic ambush of Marie while she is concentrating on her business, unaware of his intentions. Pierre pounces on Marie and scares the "!!!" out of her. She tries to run out of the small laundry room, but Pierre blocks the entrance and Marie is trapped. With no time to cover her mess or gather her wits, she records this situation as a very unpleasant experience and will not let herself be trapped there again.

Solution: Provide a safe exit out of the litter box area. Place the box in a spot with a separate entrance and exit. If this is not possible, place an upside-down box next to the litter box to serve as a stepping stool to a counter or some other way out. A kitty condo works great in this situation as well

## **2) Keep Fido away from the box.**

Problem: If your dogs are like mine, a little afternoon snack of “Kitty Roca” is a real treat. While many dogs find cat feces appetizing, most cats (and humans) find the act disturbing. Kitty will not feel comfortable using her box while Fido is lurking around.

Solution: Place a child safety gate at the entrance to the door. Leave it a few inches off the ground at the bottom, just enough for Kitty to get under but not Fido. This is a great solution for keeping small children out of the litter box as well.

## **3) Don't put the litter box near Kitty's food and water.**

Do you eat in the bathroom? Kitty doesn't like it either. Considering your cleanliness questionable, she may choose to eliminate elsewhere. Cats do not like to eliminate where they eat and drink. Also, the box shouldn't be near Kitty's bed.

## **4) Don't place the box near a door unless the door is generally left open.**

If Kitty is using the box in what she thinks is a nice quiet area and the door suddenly slams open and someone walks in right next to her, she is likely to feel startled and uncomfortable. Preferring privacy in bathrooms is a trait many cats and humans have in common.

## **5) Place two boxes side by side.**

Many cats like to urinate in one box and defecate in another. Providing two boxes close to each other but not touching gives Kitty options. If not provided with an option, Kitty may choose her own locations.

## **6) A litter box on every floor of the house.**

If you live in a multi-story house, be sure there is a litter box on every floor your cat can access. This is especially important with arthritic or geriatric cats.

## **7) Don't place the litter box on carpet.**

Often the feel of the carpet is more attractive than the litter.

## **8) Don't move the box around.**

Find the best spot for the litter box and if Kitty accepts your decision, don't move it! If you absolutely must change the litter box location, do it gradually. Put a new box in the desired area and then move the old box a few inches a day until Kitty starts using the new box.

## **Size and Type of Litter Boxes**

### **The Bigger the Better.**

Most cat boxes are too small. They are designed for the convenience of humans, not felines. The litter box should be at least 24 inches wide or long.

Here are several ways to make a great litter box. Those large under-bed storage boxes for sweaters and such make wonderful litter boxes. They're large enough for Kitty to have ample space and the sides are low enough for easy access. You can put the lids underneath them to help catch extra litter.

If you have a cat that tends to go over the side of the box, you can use the large plastic storage boxes and cut out an entryway. Some cats like the extra privacy provided by an opaque box that can't be seen through. Others prefer a clear box so they can view their environment while in the box. If unsure, try both. Your cat will show you if she has a preference.

### **Covered litter boxes**

These, too, are designed for the convenience of humans, not cats. Though they do help keep odor from permeating a room, they concentrate odor in the box. Kitty's sense of smell is so much keener than yours that the intensified odors in her box may discourage her from using it.

Some cats do prefer covered boxes because of the privacy. If you use a covered box, you should scoop it out twice daily. You should also provide an open box in close proximity.

I have used covered boxes without the lids in areas where I could not fit a large sweater box. (You might want to cut an entryway in the front for easy access since the sides are so high.) It serves as an extra box in a different location. The high sides help keep litter from flying around when a cat gets enthusiastic about using the box.

### **Automatic litter boxes**

Those self-cleaning boxes are a great invention for humans. For cats? Well, it depends. Some cats will appreciate how clean their box is kept, but others may be downright scared of this mysterious apparatus and not go anywhere near it.

Automatic boxes have a sensor that indicates when Kitty has left the box and enough time has elapsed for the cleaning to begin. But here is the problem: If Kitty is still in the room when the cleaning begins, the noise and commotion in the box may startle her into thinking, "Yikes! Lucky I wasn't still in there," convincing her to never to take that chance again.

Here is an example with two of my own cats.

Mickey and Suki are siblings rescued from a late term spay and raised as orphan kittens. They are extremely loving, well adjusted cats. I thought I would try one of the new automatic boxes as an alternative box. Mickey quickly took to it. After his business was complete, Suki ventured in to use it as well. Just before she was going to step in the box the cleaning began. Terrified by the noise and movement, she ran out and used my bathroom sink instead.

Since the noise is loud enough to hear in other rooms of the house, I removed the box so it wouldn't stress Suki any further. She quickly returned to her normal litter box habits with her old box and all was well.

On the other hand, self-cleaning litter boxes are great for finicky cats that won't use the box if it is at all soiled, and many cats are not at all disturbed by the noise. The key is to provide a regular box in addition to the automatic box in a different location. If you notice inappropriate elimination or agitation at the noise, I recommend not using the automatic box.

### **Type of Litter**

A number of different litters are available but most cats prefer the scoopable clumping litters. They are soft and sand-like and are considered a perfect elimination substrate for most cats. The litter should be about three to four inches deep.

The new crystal litters are another option. They absorb urine and its odor completely but still needs to be scooped daily. Most cats will only urinate in them, so another box with a different type of litter should be provided for defecation.

Do not use scented litters or deodorizing products in the litter. They can irritate a cat's paws and the odor is generally offensive to cats, whose sense of smell is much keener than ours. Even baking soda can be objectionable to cats. Urine causes it to fizz.

Find a litter your cat likes and stick with it. If you have to change litters, fill the box with the new litter and sprinkle some of the old litter on top. It will get mixed in with the new litter and your cat will adjust to it better.

### **Litter box Liners**

Litter box liners sound like a great idea, but I find them a nuisance and don't recommend using them. They tend to pull away from the sides of the box, which renders them useless, and when the cat scratches, they get caught in the claws. Cats don't like them, and scratching also tears holes in the liner, allowing urine to seep through the holes and increase odor.

### **Cleaning the Litter box**

Scoop the box twice a day. It takes only a few minutes and will keep you and your cat happy. It also allows you to monitor elimination, which helps monitor your cat's health.

After scooping, apply a fresh layer of litter to the box.

If you are using clumping litter, scoop twice daily and wash the box every one to two weeks. Avoid harsh chemicals for cleaning. A mild unscented soap like Ivory works great. Never use citrus scented cleaning agents, ammonia, or pine cleaning agents. These odors are offensive to cats.

Note: If you have to sterilize the box—for example if your cat was sick with an infectious agent passed in feces—use a dilute solution of bleach: one part bleach to nine parts water. Rinse thoroughly and then wash with mild soap.

Do not flush liter down the toilet. You will eventually require the services of a plumber if you do.

If you are using clay litter, apply a relatively shallow layer and dump it out completely each day. A less desirable option is to scoop twice daily. You can use a slotted scoop to remove feces and a designated un-slotted spoon to scoop out urine-saturated litter. Do not spread the wet litter around the box. This just spreads the smell and makes the box seem unclean to Kitty. Apply a small amount of litter after scooping. You may be able to manage for two to three days with this method, but if you notice any aversion whatsoever (urinating elsewhere, perching on the end of the box, running out of the box immediately after eliminating without covering), then resume with the daily dumping.

If using clay litter, the box needs to be completely cleaned weekly. This means dumping all litter, scrubbing the box with mild soap and water, and refilling with new clean litter.

Some longhaired cats prefer clay litter because the fine sand grains of clumping litter sometimes adhere to their bloomers.

**Warning:**

Pregnant women should not clean the litter box due to the danger of Toxoplasmosis. *Toxoplasma gondii* is a parasite that cats can spread through egg spores in their feces. *Toxoplasma* can cause birth defects in humans.

Daily scooping and disposing of litter helps to decrease this risk since the spores require incubation for several days before they reach an infective state.

If a pregnant woman must clean the litter box, it is imperative to wear disposable gloves and wash hands thoroughly afterwards.

**Litter Tracking**

To help control litter tracking around the house you may want to place a mat at the exit of the box. A short-napped rug such as a doormat or sisal rug is useful for catching litter. Don't use a plush fabric such as a bathroom rug. Kitty may prefer this substrate and begin to use it instead.