

How to PREVENT Litter Box Problems

Under normal conditions, your cat will like to use her litter box. Changes in your cat's litter box behavior can almost always be traced to a medical condition, stress, or something she dislikes about her litter box environment. If your cat suddenly stops using the litter box, don't believe that she is just being stubborn or spiteful. Fortunately, a little know-how and preventive maintenance can greatly reduce litter box problems.

But First:

- ▲ Never punish or yell at your cat for not using her litter box; that only makes things worse.
- ▲ Any acute or prolonged signs of litter box difficulties, such as urinating more frequently, avoiding the litter box, or straining, could indicate an urgent medical condition; call your vet right away.



The Perfect Litter Box Environment

- ▲ **Location:** Put the litter box in a pleasant location: easy to access, away from noisy or high-traffic areas, out of the dog's and baby's reach. Some cats, especially older or handicapped cats, prefer a litter box on each floor of the house. Use a minimum of one litter box per cat.
- ▲ **Litter.** Every cat has a favorite litter - work with your cat to find out her preference. When in doubt, start with an unscented clumping litter. If you have a kitten, you'll want to avoid clumping litters that contain sodium bentonite. Keep kitty's box filled with about two inches of litter, unless directed otherwise by the package. When changing litters, do it gradually over several days, or fill a second box with the new litter.
- ▲ **Type of box.** Some cats don't care for covered litter boxes. If you use a covered box, remember to scoop and clean often, as odors can be trapped inside. Replace plastic litter boxes every year or so. Some cat owners like automatic-cleaning litter boxes, others don't.
- ▲ **Clean! Clean! Clean!** Scoop clumping litter *at least* once a day, other litters as directed. Wash the litter box and replace the litter weekly. Use a mild soap and rinse well. An occasional 1-part-in-10 bleach solution is fine if you rinse thoroughly. Stay away from ammonia and citrus-scented or strong-smelling cleaners.
- ▲ **Routine.** Once you and kitty find a system that you're both comfortable with, "stay the course."

Minimize Stress

Play with your cat each day. Make sure she has some convenient scratching posts and let her sleep undisturbed in a comfy place. Give her some nice views, fun cardboard boxes to explore, a cat tree (or reasonable facsimile) to climb, and a small family of partially hidden catnip mice to discover - accommodate her natural curiosity safely. Tell your cat what a great kitty she is, and give her affection each day - but don't invade her space when she prefers to be left alone. Cats derive comfort from a predictable routine; if major changes such as a move or a new baby are inevitable, gently and gradually acclimate kitty, and maintain her routine as much as possible.

Monitor Kitty's Litter Box Habits

Get to know your cat's eating, drinking, and bathroom habits, and be alert to any changes.

Watch for Potential Health Problems

When you scoop, check the litter box contents. Occasionally watch your cat in the act, as long as you don't bother her. The urine amount emptied should be more than tiny; stools should be brown, not too hard or too runny. Your cat should seem comfortable when using her litter box. There is some room for natural variation in these behaviors - when in doubt, call your vet. (This is one of the most important reasons for keeping cats indoors. You can nip potentially serious urinary conditions in the bud - something that wouldn't be possible with outdoor cats.)

Special Cases

- ▲ Kittens should be introduced to the litter box early. If your kitten goes outside the box, wipe up the waste with a paper towel, put the towel in the box, and help kitty cover up - she'll catch on.
- ▲ Declawed cats might be more reluctant to dig in the litter, and may require a lighter litter.
- ▲ Older, handicapped, and injured cats will appreciate more and shallower litter boxes, in locations that are easily accessible, e.g. no stairs to climb to reach them.

He Did it Where? Why Did He Do That?

Shelters often cite the largest reason given by people surrendering cats is eliminating outside the litter box. Cats are fastidious creatures, and given a clean litterbox, will gravitate to it like magic. When a cat suddenly scorns the litterbox in favor of the new carpet or a closet floor, it's best we begin to investigate the cause.

If your household includes several cats, you and your veterinarian must first determine *which* cat is eliminating outside the litter box. In some cases, more than one cat may be eliminating outside the box. Occasionally, a few simple questions and some detective work can find the culprit. If the identity is still uncertain, your veterinarian can give each cat a product that will stain its urine marks with a color that can be detected by an ultraviolet light.

Eliminate Serious Medical Causes First & Get a Clean Bill of Health

Cats do nothing without reason. One of the more serious reasons for cats urinating outside the litter box is a urinary tract dysfunction, known as FLUTD (Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease). FLUTD will cause painful urination, which the cat may associate with the litterbox, thereby avoiding it. Therefore, inappropriate elimination may be your first clue that your cat needs medical care. If you ignore it, or, worse, choose to punish your cat, the disease can quickly become life-threatening, often within hours or days.

Eliminate Other Likely Causes

Next, your task is eliminating all the other causes of your cat's missing the litterbox. He missed the whole room, you say? You need to ask yourself a number of questions involving what has changed to disturb my cat? Cats are fussy little critters who like to have everything orderly in their home. The slightest change will upset your cat and he will let you know loud and clear, by peeing wherever he wants, even though he ordinarily would prefer his litterbox.

Here are some questions to consider:

- Has your cat been declawed? A rough substance in the litter box may severe pain in a declawed paw, and the cat may associate pain with the litter box. Consider using "gentle" litter for declawed cats, such as one of the newspaper-based litters (PaPurr or Yesterday's News are both good).
- Have you recently moved? - This is a biggie. Your cat will feel very insecure in new surroundings and it will take some time for his comfort level to return to normal.
- Is there a new baby in the house? Cats can be very jealous and will need lots of extra love and cuddling so they know that they are still first in your heart. (You may feel a little differently, but humor them, okay?)
- Is there a new cat in your home? A new dog? The above applies equally to these situations, and in the case of another cat, make sure it has its own litterbox. Cats hate to share, particularly if they've never had to before.
- Is his litterbox meticulously clean? If it's a plastic litter box, maybe it needs to be replaced.
- Have you changed your brand of litter? Cats tend to be creatures of habit, and any changes should be done gradually. In the case of litter changes, just sprinkle a bit of the new litter on top of the formerly used brand. Then gradually add more until the cat has accepted the change.
- Have you moved the litterbox? Likewise, cats are used to their normal routines.
- Has another cat in the household recently had surgery or been ill? It sounds strange, but the odor of anesthesia and medication can linger and create fear in your other cats.
- Is it possible any trauma has occurred when your cat was using the box (such as attack or intimidation by another cat)? A cat will avoid any source of discomfort, whether it be physical or emotional. His mind will link the location with the trauma.

Territorial Marking

Territorial marking or spraying by cats is a whole different subject, as you will soon learn. So, you've eliminated all of the above potential causes, and your kitty is still indulging in his perverse activity. It could be that he is not urinating "normally", but spraying, or marking his territory. This is common, particularly among un-neutered mature male cats, and in some male cats that were neutered after reaching sexual maturity.