

Solving Litter Box Problems

Cats tend to have surface and location preferences for where, and on what, they like to eliminate. Most cats prefer a loose, sandy substance, which is why they will use a litter box. It's only when their preferences include the laundry basket, the bed, or the Persian rug, that normal elimination behavior becomes a problem. With careful analysis of your cat's environment, specific factors that have contributed to the litter box problem can usually be identified and changed, so that your cat will again use the litter box for elimination.

Some common reasons why cats don't use the litter box are: medical, anxiety, an aversion to the box, a preference for a particular surface not provided by the box, a preference for a location where there is no box or a combination of them. You'll need to do some detective work to determine the reason your cat is house soiling. Sometimes, the reason the litter box problem initially started may not be the same reason it's continuing. For example, your cat may have stopped using the litter box because of a urinary tract infection, and has now developed a surface preference for carpet and a location preference for the bedroom closet. You would need to address all the factors in order to resolve the problem.

Cats don't stop using their litter boxes because they're mad or upset and are trying to get revenge for something that "offended" or "angered" them. Because humans act for these reasons, it's easy for us to assume that our pets do as well. Animals don't act out of spite or revenge so it won't help to give your cat special privileges in the hope that she'll start using the litter box again.

Medical Problems

It's common for cats to begin eliminating outside of their litter box when they have a medical problem. For example, a urinary tract infection or crystals in the urine can make urination very painful. Cats often associate this pain with the litter box and begin to avoid it. If your cat has a house-soiling problem, check with your veterinarian first to rule out any medical problems for the behavior. Cats don't always act sick, even when they are, and only a trip to the veterinarian for a thorough physical examination can rule out a medical problem.

Anxiety

It's also common for cats to begin eliminating outside of their litter box when there are stressed or feeling anxious. Many things can cause anxiety, like a new baby, a new pet, moving, conflict between animals in the home, or a roaming cat sitting outside the window.

What You Can Do

- If your cat is eliminating in response to a new resident in your home (a new baby, roommate, or spouse), have the new resident make friends with your cat by feeding, grooming, and playing with your cat. Also make sure good things happen to your cat when the new baby is around (see our handout: "Preparing Your Pet for Baby's Arrival").
- Resolve conflicts between animals in your home (see our handouts: "Feline Social behavior and Aggression between Family Cats").
- Restrict your cat's access to doors and windows through which they can observe animals outside. If this isn't possible, discourage the presence of other animals near your house (see our handout: "Discouraging Roaming Cats").

- Reduce your cat's stress using stress reducing techniques like clicker training and play therapy (see our handouts: "Stress Relief for Your Pet", "Play with Your Cat", and "Clicker Training").

Aversion to the Litter box

Your cat may have decided that the litter box is an unpleasant place to eliminate if:

- The box is not clean enough for her.
- She has experienced painful urination or defecation in the box due to a medical problem.
- She has been startled by a noise while using the box.
- She has been "ambushed" while in the box either by another cat, a child, a dog, or by you, if you were attempting to catch her for some reason.
- She associates the box with punishment (someone punished her for eliminating outside the box, and then placed her in the box).

What You Can Do

- Keep the litter box extremely clean. Scoop at least once a day and change the litter completely every four to five days. If you use scoop able litter, you may not need to change the litter as frequently. This will vary according to how many cats are in the household, how many litter boxes you have, and how large the cats are that are using the box or boxes. A good guideline is that is you can smell the box, and then you can be sure it's offensive to your cat as well.
- Add a new box in a different location than the old one and use a different type of litter in the new box. Because your cat has decided that her old litter box is unpleasant, you'll want to make the new one different enough that she doesn't simply apply the old, negative associations to the new box.
- Make sure that the litter box isn't near an appliance that makes noise or in an area of the house that your cat doesn't frequent.
- If ambushing is a problem, try to create more than one exit from the litter box, so that if the "ambusher" is waiting by one area, your cat always has an escape route.

Surface Preferences

All animals develop preferences for particular surface on which they like to eliminate. These preferences may be established early in life, but they may also change overnight for reasons that we don't understand. Your cat may have a surface preference if:

- She consistently eliminates on a particular texture. For example, soft-textured surfaces, such as carpet, bedding, or clothing, or slick-textured surfaces, such as tile, cement, bathtubs, or sinks.
- She frequently scratches on this same texture after elimination, even if she eliminated in the litter box.
- She is or was previously an outdoor cat and prefers to eliminate on grass or soil.

What You Can Do

- If your cat is eliminating on soft surfaces, try using a high quality, scoop able litter, and put a soft rug under the litter box.
- If your cat is eliminating on slick, smooth surfaces, try putting just a very thin layer of litter at one end of the box, leaving the other end bare, and put the box on a hard floor.
- If your cat has a history of being outdoors, add some soil or sod to the litter box.

- Make the area where she has been eliminating aversive to her by covering it with an upside down carpet runner or aluminum foil, or by playing citrus-scented cotton balls over the area (see our handout: “Aversives For Cats”).

Location Preferences

Your cat may have a location preference if:

- She always eliminates in quiet, protected places, such as under a desk downstairs or in a closet.
- She eliminates in an area where the litter box was previously kept or where there are urine odors.
- She eliminates on a different level of the house from where the litter box is located.

What You Can Do

- Put at least one litter box on every level of your house.
- Make the area where she has been eliminating aversive to her by covering it with upside down carpet runner or aluminum foil, or by placing citrus-scented cotton balls over the area (see our handout: “Aversives For Cats”).

OR

- Put a litter box in the location where your cat has been eliminating. When she has consistently used this box for at least one month, you may gradually move it to a more convenient location at a rate of an inch per day.

Cleaning Soiled Areas

Because animals are highly motivated to continue soiling an area that smells like urine or feces, it’s imperative that you thoroughly clean the soiled areas (see our handout: “Successful Cleaning to Remove Pet Odors and Stains”).

What not to do

Don’t ever punish your cat for eliminating outside the litter box. If you find a soiled area, it’s too late to administer a correction. Do nothing but clean it up. Rubbing your cat’s nose in it, taking her to the spot and scolding her, or any other type of punishment, will only make her afraid of you or afraid to eliminate in your presence. Animals don’t understand punishment after the fact, even if it’s only seconds later. Punishment will do more harm than good.

Other Types of House Soiling Problems

- **Marking/Spraying:** To determine if your cat is marking or spraying, please see our handout: “Territorial Marking in Cats.”
- **Fears or Phobias:** When an animal becomes frightened, they may lose control of their bladder and/or bowels. If your cat is afraid of loud noises, strangers, or other animals, she may house soil when she is exposed to these stimuli (see our handout: “The Fearful Cat”).