

Preventing Litter Box Issues

The number one reason cats are surrendered to shelters is due to elimination outside of the litter box. This FAQ sheet is designed to help you better understand cats litter box habits and help identify why your cat may not be using the litter box.

Before we can discuss anything about litter box training, we need to emphasize, you NEVER punish your cat for not using a litter box. Unlike humans, cats do not act out of spite or revenge. Punishment is not a way to resolve litter box problems.

Medical

The number one reason a cat will urinate or defecate out of the box is medical. Take your pet to the vet to get a full exam, mentioning the elimination concern. You need to discover the underlying cause. There could be a medical problem that you can't see, such as:

- Illness, infection, injury, age, arthritis, etc. – associates pain with using the box
- Experiences discomfort getting into box or getting up or down stairs to box
- May have lower urinary tract disease
- Associates box with fear – was startled while using the box by another animal, loud noises, a human, etc.
- Cats should be spay/neutered by six months of age (earlier if possible). Sexually mature, intact cats frequently use urine and fecal markings to indicate territory.
- Declawed cats are often more likely to have sensitivities to litter, consider an empty litter box or one lined with only newspaper.

Litter Box Set-up

It needs to be very easy for your cat to find and use the litter box. It helps to “Think Like a Cat”, to identify what the cat sees, meet the cats needs, provide options and set your cat up for success!

- The rule is one litter box per cat, plus one. Extra litter boxes are necessary, as some cats like to urinate in one and defecate in the other.
- Litter boxes should be scooped daily. Cats are extremely fastidious and like clean environments. Litter boxes should be emptied and replaced or bleached and scrubbed every 10-14 days. If the box is too dirty and holds too many smells (where their claws meet the plastic) they'll avoid it.
- Choose a litter that appeals to your cat. Cats have a natural desire to dig, eliminate and cover. Most cats prefer the texture of sand-like scooping litters. Scoopable and odorless litters are recommended.
- Be aware of excess dust – if it's overwhelming for you to breathe, it's overwhelming for your pet.
- Young kittens prone to ingest litter should use non-clumping until 4-months of age.
- Do not use scented litter. Use a mild/unscented cleaning liquid when cleaning box. The cat only wants to smell his own scent in the litter box – otherwise can feel threatened.
- Do not use litter box liners. They easily rip and many are scented.
- Kittens and cats all have a natural desire to use loose material instead of litter. When introducing a new cat or a kitten, consider limiting their territory until they learn to use the litter box for acceptable elimination.
- Praise and rewards will speed up the learning process. Like small children, they should not be expected to travel very far to find their toilet area.

Location and type of the litter boxes are very important! They should be placed in a quiet, private location that is easily accessible for your cat, where they will not be disturbed or potentially cornered by other pets or children.

- The best location for a litter box is where, when the cat is using the box, he can see out and around him as much as possible. Along the middle of a wall is better than in a corner.
- The best type of litter box is a large, see-through bin, like a Sterilite container. Higher-walled boxes also prevent litter from spilling and are good for cats who sometimes pee “higher” along the edges of the box. These are usually cheaper than the litterboxes in the pet aisle, too!
- Avoid covered litter boxes. Your cat needs to be able to escape quickly if threatened in any way. Cats also do not like how the smell festers in these boxes.
- Do not place them next to their food or water – cats are clean animals and litter plus food doesn’t mix.
- Size of the litter box matters. Most litter boxes are too small. The box should be 1 ½ - 2x the length of cat.
- Top-entry – not good – your cat can be surprised while going.
- Toilet training is unnatural for a cat to use and as they get older, it won’t work. Also, it’s an obstacle if they’re ever boarded or need to be rehomed.
- Electric/self cleaning – leads to aversion problems as cat can get scared when it auto-cleans and they’re in the box or they can be scared by the noises in general.

Litter Box Buffet:

You may want to set up a litter box buffet – with disposable boxes to see which litter box your cat prefers; offer a variety of textures and depths. Also try a variety of litters in different boxes at the same time to see which type they prefer.

Environment

- Cats may urinate outside the box due to a change in the cats home: new cat, new fragrance plug-in, general tension in home, divorce, child moving out, remodeling, new dog or other pet, inter-cat hostility, past punishment, abuse, trauma, etc.
- Clean urine-soaked areas with a strong enzymatic cleaner to neutralize the scent. The Equalizer, Anti Icky Poo, and K.O.E. (Kennel Odor Eliminator) are recommended. Use a black light to check affected areas.
- If it is environmental, consider the following:
 - o Pheromone therapy: use Feliway plug-ins (available from your vet) and/or put the cat’s scent on more items in the home: rub a sock around the scent glands on the cats face/neck, then rub the sock on objects in the environment (you can’t smell it, but your cat will); also offer more scratching posts where the cat can “mark” with its scent glands on his paws
 - o Increase space: Increase number of boxes, add or change box locations, add feeding stations (separate bowls)
 - o Do online research: one very good site is Jackson Galaxy, cat behaviorist, of the “My Cat from Hell” TV series: **www.jacksongalaxy.com**
 - o Call your veterinarian and/or a cat behaviorist to help:
 - **Penny Paiser-Wilson, Tranquil Tails**, Neenah: 920-720-9741 or penny@tranquiltails.com - tranquiltails.com
 - **Vonnie Keebaugh, CVT**, Appleton: 920-720-0678 or catsense2me@aol.com

NOTE: Cats who have previously had elimination issues – should NOT be labeled or euthanized – behavior very often is associated with the environment, and usually does not go with the cat into a new home.