

LITTERBOX PROBLEMS

When your cat stops using the litterbox it's stressful for you and your cat. There are many reasons why your cat may avoid using the litterbox and it's important to figure the true cause in order to get everything back on track. Litterbox use problems can be complex and diverse, but if you take a close look at your cat's environment you should be able to discover the source(s) of the issue - and most are easy to remedy.

First and foremost, check in with your veterinarian to be sure that there is not a medical cause for your cat not using her litterbox. Disease, infection, injury, poor vision, etc. can all cause a cat to stop using the litterbox.

COMMON CAUSES OF INAPPROPRIATE ELIMINATION

- Not enough litterboxes
- Not the right type of litter
- Litterbox location not right
- Litterbox type not right
- Litterbox not big enough
- Medical cause (i.e. urinary tract infection)
- Cat had a negative experience near the litterbox
- Being bullied by other cats in the home
- Too much or not enough litter in the box

NUMBER OF LITTERBOXES

Ensure you have enough litterboxes for your cat(s). Some cats will not urinate in a box that has already been defecated in or use a box that has already been used by another cat. The general rule of thumb is one (1) box per cat + one (1). So, if you have one (1) cat you need two (2) boxes, two (2) cats need three (3) boxes and so on.

LITTER PREFERENCES

Cats have a strong sense of smell and most do not like litters with a perfume-like scent or a lot of dust. The texture of litter (clumping, clay, pellet, etc.) can make a difference as well. In general, most cats prefer an unscented, clumping litter that is the consistency of fine sand. Try offering your cat multiple litterboxes with different litter types to see what she prefers.

LOCATION

Cats have preferences of where they like to eliminate. Most cats prefer to eliminate in an area that is socially significant to them and away from where they eat and drink. It's best to avoid high traffic areas (like hallways) and tight spaces (like between a wall & the toilet). Place several litterboxes in various areas around your home - don't line the boxes up next to each other. Cats are also creatures of habit. If you need to move the litterbox from its current location, do so very slowly so she has a chance to adjust to the change.



SIZE

When it comes to litterboxes, size does matter – bigger is better in most cases. The litterbox needs to be 1-1/2 times the length of your cat from nose to the base of the tail. If your cat is older or very young, you may need a box with a low entry to facilitate easy access.

TYPE

Like litter, cats will have a preference for the type of litterbox. There are many options – covered, uncovered, top entry, automatic, etc. Covered litterboxes and automatic litterboxes should generally be avoided as they can restrict the space your cat needs to eliminate appropriately, scare your cat due to noise and do not provide adequate ventilation to allow the litter dust particles to escape. You may need to try a variety of types to discover what your cat prefers.

CLEANLINESS

Remove waste at least twice per day at minimum (morning and night) – more often if there are multiple cats using the same box. Add litter as needed (ideal amount is 3 inches) and wash the litterbox with hot, soapy water every 2 weeks. Avoid using air freshener in the room where the litterbox is located as cats generally find the smell offensive.

STRESS

Multi-cat issues, introduction of a new furry friend, household chaos and sudden changes can all cause stress to your cat and contribute to her to not using the litterbox. Reduce your cat's stress level with interactive play, creating a Cat Safe Zone (see below) or using pheromones such as Feliway.

DECLAWED CATS

Declawed cats often have hypersensitive feet so regular litter can be painful. If your cat is declawed and not using the litterbox try replacing the regular cat litter with a puppy pad or CareFresh litter.

PAWSITIVELY HELPFUL HINTS



If your cat stops using the litterbox and you are unsure of the cause, only change ONE thing at a time.



Avoid ammonia-based or other strong scented products for cleaning – as the smells associated with those cleaners are similar to cat urine. Use an enzyme based cleaner specifically made for pet odors instead. A black light may also be helpful in determining exactly where the soiled spots are.



Avoid using litter liners as they can cause urine to pile up, contributing to offensive odors. In addition, they are tactilely offensive to most cats. Do not punish your cat for eliminating in inappropriate places as this will only teach her that eliminating in your presence is not okay.



Make preferred elimination spots that are outside of the litterbox undesirable. Clean the spots well and put aluminum foil or a carpet runner upside down on top of the spot.



Ensure your cat is spayed and/or neutered.





Play with your cat frequently. Play reduces stress – so the more your cat has, the less stress there will be. With less stress, litterbox problems may resolve on their own. Kittens should get at least four (4), fifteen (15) minute play sessions a day and adult cats should get at least two (2), fifteen (15) minute play sessions a day.



Offer lots of low to the ground hiding places (boxes, crates, shelves) and vertical spaces (shelves on the wall, cat towers) for your cats to go to feel safe and to give them both mental and physical stimulation. Ideally, your cats should be able to have enough vertical space that he/she can traverse a large portion of the house without ever having to touch the floor.



Cat Safe Zone – This is an area in your home that can be completely closed off from the rest of the house if needed. The room needs to have adequate space for a litterbox, food & water dishes, toys and places to hide or get up high. Ideally, the room will have a window or other source for natural light. It is important that cats are able to express natural behaviors while in the room such as jumping and scratching – as this will eliminate some of the stress associated with being isolated in this room.



If your cat is using the litterbox but also urine marking, refer to the urine marking tip sheet for more information.