

# Litter Box Problems



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At least 10% of all cats develop elimination problems. Some stop using the box altogether. Some only use their boxes for urination or defecation but not for both. Still others eliminate both in and out of their boxes. Elimination problems can develop as a result of conflict between multiple cats in a home, as a result of a dislike for the litter-box type or the litter itself, as a result of a past medical condition, or as a result of the cat deciding she doesn't like the location or placement of the litter box.

Once a cat avoids her litter box for whatever reason, her avoidance can become a chronic problem because the cat can develop a surface or location preference for elimination—and this preference might be to your living room rug or your favorite easy chair. The best approach to dealing with these problems is to prevent them before they happen by making your cat's litter boxes as cat-friendly as possible. See our common litter-box management issues below, and our ways to make litter boxes cat-friendly. It is also important that you pay close attention to your cat's elimination habits so that you can identify problems in the making. If your cat does eliminate outside her box, you must act quickly to resolve the problem before she develops a strong preference for eliminating on an unacceptable surface or in an unacceptable area.

Litter box use problems in cats can be diverse and complex. Behavioral treatments are often effective, but the treatments must be tailored to the cat's specific problem. Be certain to read the entire article to help you identify your particular cat's problem and to familiarize yourself with the different resolution approaches to ensure success with your cat.

## Why Do Some Cats Eliminate Outside the Litter Box?

### Litter-Box Management Problems

If your cat isn't comfortable with her litter box or can't easily access it, she probably won't use it. The following common litter-box problems might cause her to eliminate outside of her box:

- You haven't cleaned your cat's litter box often or thoroughly enough.
- You haven't provided enough litter boxes for your household. Be sure to have a litter box for each of your cats, as well as one extra.
- Your cat's litter box is too small for her.
- Your cat can't easily get to her litter box at all times.
- Your cat's litter box has a hood or liner that makes her uncomfortable.

- The litter in your cat's box is too deep. Cats usually prefer one to two inches of litter.

## **Surface Preference**

Some cats develop preferences for eliminating on certain surfaces or textures like carpet, potting soil or bedding.

## **Litter Preference or Aversion**

As predators who hunt at night, cats have sensitive senses of smell and touch to help them navigate through their environment. These sensitivities can also influence a cat's reaction to her litter. Cats who have grown accustomed to a certain litter might decide that they dislike the smell or feel of a different litter.

## **Location Preference or Aversion**

Like people and dogs, cats develop preferences for where they like to eliminate and may avoid locations they don't like. This means they might avoid their litter box if it's in a location they dislike.

## **Inability to Use the Litter Box**

Geriatric cats or cats with physical limitations may have a difficult time using certain types of litter boxes such as top-entry boxes, or litter boxes with high sides.

## **Negative Litter-Box Association**

There are many reasons why a cat who has reliably used her litter box in the past starts to eliminate outside of the box. One common reason is that something happened to upset her while she was using the litter box. If this is the case with your cat, you might notice that she seems hesitant to return to the box. She may enter the box, but then leave very quickly—sometimes before even using the box.

One common cause for this is painful elimination. If your cat had a medical condition that caused her pain when she eliminated, she may have learned to associate the discomfort with using her litter box. Even if your cat's health has returned to normal, that association may still cause her to avoid her litter box.

## **Household Stress**

Stress can cause litter-box problems. Cats can be stressed by events that their owners may not think of as traumatic. Changes in things that even indirectly affect the cat, like moving, adding new animals or family members to your household—even changing your daily routine—can make your cat feel anxious.

## **Multi-Cat Household Conflict**

Sometimes one or more cats in a household control access to litter boxes and prevent the other cats from using them. Even if one of the cats isn't actually confronting the other cats in the litter box, any conflict between cats in a household can create enough stress to cause litter-box problems.

## **Medical Problems That Can Cause Inappropriate Elimination**

### **Urinary Tract Infection (UTI)**

If your cat frequently enters her litter box and seems to produce only small amounts of urine, she may have a urinary tract infection. See a veterinarian to rule out this possible medical problem.

### **Feline Interstitial Cystitis**

Feline interstitial cystitis is a neurological disease that affects a cat's bladder ("cystitis" means inflamed bladder). Cats with cystitis will attempt to urinate frequently and may look as if they are straining, but with little success. They may lick themselves where they urinate, and they may have blood in their urine. Feline interstitial cystitis can cause a cat to eliminate outside of her box, but this is only because of the increased urgency to urinate and because there is pain involved in urination. Feline interstitial cystitis is very serious and can be life-threatening to the cat. It must be treated immediately by a veterinarian.

### **Kidney Stones or Blockage**

If your cat has kidney stones or a blockage, she may frequently enter her litter box. She may also experience pain and meow or cry when she tries to eliminate. Her abdomen may be tender to the touch.

## **Other Behavior Problems to Rule Out**

### **Urine Marking**

Urine marking is a problem that most pet owners consider a litter box problem since it involves elimination outside the box, but the cause and treatment are entirely different from other litter-box problems and therefore it is considered a rule out. A cat who urine marks will regularly eliminate in her litter box, but will also deposit urine in other locations, usually on vertical surfaces. When marking, she'll usually back up to a vertical object like a chair side, wall or speaker, stand with her body erect and her tail extended straight up in the air, and spray urine onto the surface. Often her tail will twitch while she's spraying. The amount of urine a cat sprays when she's urine marking is usually less than the amount she would void during regular elimination in her box. For more information about this problem, please see our article, [Urine Marking in Cats](#).

## What to Do If Your Cat Eliminates Outside the Litter Box

- Basic Tips for Making Cats Feel Better About Using Their Litter Boxes
- Virtually all cats like clean litter boxes, so scoop and change your cat's litter at least once a day. Rinse the litter box out completely with baking soda or unscented soap once a week.
- The majority of cats prefer large boxes that they can enter easily. Plastic sweater storage containers make excellent litter boxes.
- Most cats like a shallow bed of litter. Provide one to two inches of litter rather than three to four inches.
- Most cats prefer clumping, unscented litter.
- Your cat may prefer the type of litter she used as a kitten.
- Most cats don't like box liners or lids on their boxes.
- Cats like their litter boxes located in a quiet but not "cornered" location. They like to be able to see people or other animals approaching, and they like to have multiple escape routes in case they want to leave their boxes quickly.
- Because self-cleaning boxes are generally cleaner than traditional types of litter boxes, many cats accept them readily. However, if you're using a self-cleaning litter box and your cat starts eliminating outside the box, try switching to a traditional type of litter box.

### Resolving a Litter-Box Problem

The first step in resolving elimination outside the litter box is to rule out urine marking and medical problems. Have your cat checked thoroughly by a veterinarian. Once your veterinarian determines that your cat doesn't have a medical condition or issue, try following these guidelines:

- Provide enough litter boxes. Make sure you have one for each cat in your household, plus one extra. For example, if you have three cats, you'll need a minimum of four litter boxes.
- Place litter boxes in accessible locations, away from high-traffic areas and away from areas where the cat might feel trapped. If you live in a multistory residence, you may need to provide a litter box on each level. Keep boxes away from busy, loud or intimidating places, like next to your washer and dryer or next to your dog's food and water bowls, or in areas where there's a lot of foot traffic.
- Put your cat's food bowls somewhere other than right next to her litter box.
- Remove covers and liners from all litter boxes.
- Give your cat a choice of litter types. Cats generally prefer clumping litter with a medium to fine texture. Use unscented litter. Offer different types of litter in boxes placed side-by-side to allow your cat to show you her preference.

- Scoop at least once a day. Once a week, clean all litter boxes with warm water and unscented soap, baking soda or no soap, and completely replace the litter. The problem with scented cleaners is that your cat could develop an aversion to the scent.
- Clean accidents thoroughly with an enzymatic cleanser designed to neutralize pet odors. You can find this kind of cleaner at most pet stores.
- If your cat soils in just a few spots, place litter boxes there. If it's not possible to put a box in a spot where your cat has eliminated, place her food bowl, water bowl, bed or toys in that area to discourage further elimination.
- Make inappropriate elimination areas less appealing. Try putting regular or motion-activated lights in dark areas. You can also make surfaces less pleasant to stand on by placing upside-down carpet runners, tin foil or double-sided sticky tape in the area where your cat has eliminated in the past.

### **If Your Cat Has Developed a Surface or Location Preference**

If your cat seems to prefer eliminating on a certain kind of surface or in a certain location, you'll need to make that surface or its location less appealing. If the preference is in a dark area, try putting a bright light or, even better, a motion-activated light in the area. You can also make surfaces less pleasant to stand on by placing upside-down carpet runners, tin foil or double-sided sticky tape where your cat has eliminated in the past. At the same time, provide your cat with extra litter boxes in acceptable places in case part of her problem is the location of her usual litter box, and be sure to give her multiple kinds of litter to choose from so that she can show you which one she prefers. Put the boxes side-by-side for a while, each with a different type of litter, and check to see which one your cat decides to use.

Clean accidents thoroughly with an enzymatic cleanser designed to neutralize pet odors. You can find this kind of cleaner at most pet stores.

### **If Your Cat Has Developed a Litter Preference or Aversion**

Cats usually develop a preference for litter type and scent as kittens. Some cats adapt to a change of litter without any problem at all, while other cats may feel uncomfortable using a type of litter that they didn't use when they were young.

If you think your cat may dislike her litter type, texture or smell, try offering her different types of litter to use. Cats generally prefer clumping litter with a medium to fine texture. They also usually prefer unscented litter. To help your cat pick her preferred litter, put a few boxes side-by-side with different types of litter in them. She'll use the one she likes best.

Clean accidents thoroughly with an enzymatic cleanser designed to neutralize pet odors. You can find this kind of cleaner at most pet stores.

## **If Your Cat Is Unable to Use Her Litter Box**

Special-needs cats such as those who are older, arthritic or still very young might have trouble with certain types of litter boxes. Boxes that have sides that are too high or have a top-side opening might make it difficult for your cat to enter or leave the box. Try switching to a litter box with low sides.

As in any situation where the cat may have eliminated outside her box, clean accidents thoroughly with an enzymatic cleanser designed to neutralize pet odors. You can find this kind of cleaner at most pet stores.

## **Treatment for Negative Litter Box Association**

If your cat has experienced some kind of frightening or upsetting event while using her litter box, she could associate that event with the litter box and avoid going near it. Things that might upset your cat while she's eliminating in her box include being cornered or trapped by a dog, cat or person, hearing a loud noise or commotion, or seeing something frightening or startling. These experiences—or any other disturbing experience—could make your cat very reluctant to enter her litter box. If your cat is afraid of her litter box, you may notice her running into the box and then leaving again very quickly, sometimes before she's finished eliminating. You may also notice her eliminating nearby, but not inside her box. This means that your cat is worried about using her box, especially if she has reliably used litter box in the past.

## **Changing the Way Your Cat Feels**

If your cat associates her litter box with unpleasant things, you can work to help her develop new and pleasant associations. Cats can't be forced to enjoy something, and trying to show your cat that her litter box is safe by placing her in the box will likely backfire and increase her dislike of the box. It's usually not a good idea to try to train your cat to use her litter box by offering her treats like you would a dog, because many cats do not like attention while they're eliminating. However, a professional animal behavior consultant, such as a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB) or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB) may be able to help you design a successful retraining or counterconditioning program.

Sometimes retraining to overcome litter-box fears or aversions may not be necessary. Here are some steps that you can try to help your cat learn new pleasant associations:

- Move your cat's litter box to a new location, or add a few litter boxes in different locations at the same time. Pick locations where your cat can see who is approaching from any sides that aren't backed by walls. These locations should also have multiple escape routes so that your cat can quickly leave her litter box if she suddenly feels anxious. If possible, make sure that children or other animals who might seem threatening to your cat can't get near her litter box.

- Fill the litter boxes one to two inches deep with a litter that is a little different from the litter in the boxes your cat avoids. Use a finer or coarser texture. If you've been using scented litter, try unscented litter.
- Try playing with your cat near her litter box. Also leave treats and toys for her to find and enjoy in the general area leading to her box. Don't put her food bowl next to the box, though, because cats usually don't like to eliminate close to their food.
- If you have a long-haired cat, try carefully and gently clipping the hair on her hind end if you notice that it gets soiled or matted during elimination. Matting can cause the hair to get pulled when the cat eliminates. That can be painful for the cat and make her skittish of her litter box.

### **Treatment for Household Stress**

Cats sometimes stop using their litter boxes when they feel stressed. Identify and, if possible, eliminate any sources of stress or frustration in your cat's environment. For instance, keep her food bowls full and in the same place, keep her routine as predictable as possible, prevent the dog from chasing her, close blinds on windows and doors so she isn't upset by cats outside. If you can't eliminate sources of stress, try to reduce them. Incorporate the use of sprays or diffusers that deliver a synthetic pheromone that has been shown to have some effect in relieving stress in cats.

### **Treatment for Multi-Cat Household Conflict**

Sometimes an elimination problem can develop as a result of conflict between cats who live together. If you have multiple cats and aren't sure which cat is soiling, speak with your veterinarian about giving fluorescein, a harmless dye, to one of your cats. Although the dye does not usually stain carpeting, it causes urine to glow blue under ultraviolet light for about 24 hours. If you can't get or use fluorescein, you can temporarily confine your cats, one at a time, to determine which one is eliminating outside of the litter boxes in your home.

If there is a conflict between your cats and one of them seems stressed, provide additional litter boxes in locations where the anxious cat spends the majority of her time. Also be sure to provide adequate resting areas for each cat. It can very useful in multi-cat households to create vertical resting spots on shelves or window sills or by buying multi-perch cat trees. It may help to distribute resources such as food, water, cat posts or trees, and litter boxes so that each individual cat can make use of them without coming into contact or having a conflict with one of the other cats. Using synthetic pheromone sprays or diffusers can reduce general social stress in your household.

### **Medications**

Always consult with your veterinarian or a veterinary behaviorist before giving your cat any type of medication for a behavior problem.



Medications can provide additional help in treating inappropriate elimination when the behavior is in response to stress or anxiety. It's unlikely to be helpful if your cat eliminates outside her litter box because of litter-management problems, an aversion to a particular kind of litter or location, a preference for a particular surface or location, or a physical inability to use the box. If you'd like to explore this option, speak with your veterinarian, a veterinary behaviorist or a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist who can work closely with your vet.

## **What NOT to Do**

Regardless of what you do to solve your cat's elimination problems, here are a few things to avoid:

- Do not rub your cat's nose in urine or feces.
- Do not scold your cat and carry or drag her to the litter box.
- Do not confine your cat to a small room with the litter box, for days to weeks or longer, without doing anything else to resolve her elimination problems.
- Do not clean up accidents with an ammonia-based cleanser. Urine contains ammonia, and therefore cleaning with ammonia could attract your cat to the same spot to urinate again. Instead, use a product specifically for cleaning pet accidents.