

LITTERBOX ISSUES

The most common behavior problem reported by cat owners is inappropriate elimination. It is important to address any litter box concerns as soon as they are observed. Any time your cat is not using the litter box or marking in the house you should contact your veterinarian to rule out any underlying medical concerns that could be contributing to the behavior.

Not Using Litterbox

There are a variety of reasons a cat may not be appropriately using the litter box. Use patience while sorting out the cause and never punish a cat for not using a litter box. Cats cannot connect the punishment to their actions, and it may cause the behavior to worsen. Below are some tips that can help prevent litter box issues.

- Medical issues – There are several medical issues that can cause a cat to stop using the litter box. Always contact your veterinarian at the first sign of your cat eliminating outside of the litter box.
- Location - Cats can be sensitive to activity near their litter boxes. Be sure that you place the litter box in a low traffic area that is not near loud noises such as washers and dryers.
- Access - Be sure that your cat can easily access the litter box. Older cats and kittens may need a litter box with lower sides so they can easily enter. Stairs can also be a challenge for older cats, and you may need to have a litter box on each floor of the house. Be mindful that other animals in the house are not chasing or harassing cat on the way to the litter box.
- Litter preference – Changes in brand, scent, or texture of litter can be upsetting to some cats. Cats who have been declawed may prefer a softer litter over traditional clay litter. Scented litters can be too strong of an odor for cats and they may avoid the litter box.
- Cleaning frequency - Removing all urine and feces at least once a day is best, as cats do not like to dig in heavily soiled litter.
- Number of boxes - A good rule of thumb is to have one litter box per cat plus one. For a single cat this would mean having two boxes. Some cats prefer to urinate in one litter box and defecate in a separate litter box.
- Multiple cat households – In houses with multiple cats it may help to have litter boxes in separate areas of the home as to avoid one cat from preventing the others access.



- Size – Be sure that the litter box is large enough for your cat to stand and move around freely. Covered litter boxes can be helpful to contain litter but may be too restrictive for larger cats and can trap more odors that may be unpleasant for cats.
- Self-cleaning litter boxes – These litter boxes offer convenience for people but are often frightening to cats. The sounds and movement of the cleaning process can be loud and deter cats from returning to the litter box. If you chose to use a self-cleaning litter box it is best to have a traditional litter box available in a separate area as well.

Marking

Cats mark as a form of communication. Often a cat who is marking in the home will continue to use the litter box to defecate and empty bladder. Marking is identified by small spray of urine on walls or other vertical objects such as couches or sides of bed. Marking behavior will not generally result in a large amount of urine in one place. When a cat is marking, they may stand rather than squat and tail may be straight up and twitching.

- Medical issues - There are several medical issues that can cause a cat to stop using the litter box. Always contact your veterinarian at the first sign of your cat eliminating outside of the litter box.
- Unsterilized cats - Cats, especially males, who have not been sterilized are more likely to mark indoors. They mark to identify their territory and to let other cats know they are available to mate. This can include seeing other cats that are outdoors and may be marking as well.
- Territorial marking – Any cat may display marking behavior when there is a major change in their living situation. Some common examples are the addition of a new pet, a new baby in the home, or moving to a new home.

Next Steps

There are a few strategies that can help to encourage a cat to return to using their litter box.

- Moving litter box – If your cat is urinating repeatedly in one spot of the house you can move a litter box to that location. If your cat uses the litter box consistently in that location for a month, then you can start moving it a couple inches per day towards your preferred location. While this process does take time, going too fast will undo any progress.
- Multiple litter boxes – If your cat has access to multiple levels of your home it is best to have a litter box on each level. This can help your cat get to the box before they have an accident. This is especially true for cats that are ill, kittens and senior cats.
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- Remove opportunity – To discourage your cat from returning to a spot they have urinated you can cover the location with aluminum foil or double-sided tape. Natural citrus smells also can be deterrents for cats. Keep in mind that cats have a much stronger sense of smell than people, so you do not need much to be effective.
- Never use punishment if your cat is not using the litter box. Striking a cat or other physical corrections are likely going to cause your cat to be fearful of you and could cause your cat to become aggressive.

Cleaning

Cats are more likely to return to a location that smells like urine or feces, so it is important to clean soiled areas thoroughly.

- Clean any urine accidents thoroughly with an enzymatic cleanser designed to neutralize pet odors.
- You can locate urine stains using a fluorescent black light as the stains will glow under the light.
- Be sure areas are completely odor free before using a steam cleaner. Steam cleaning can lock odors into carpet.

When to Seek Help

If you are following the guidelines above and your cats litter box issues continue, there may be a more complex issue. In those cases, you should consult with a Certified Veterinary Behaviorist so they can evaluate your situation and develop a plan that is appropriate for you and your pet.