

SOLVING LITTER BOX PROBLEMS

HOW IT STARTS...

One of the most common behavior problems cat owners address is a “litter box problem”—more specifically, a cat who does not use the litter box consistently to eliminate. Cats are naturally inclined to seek a loose, scratchable surface in which to eliminate, so most cats pick up on using the litter box quickly. Many cats, though, will go through a phase in their lives when litter box use becomes less consistent. The habit of consistently using the litter box can be altered by one or two incidents the pattern is then broken and has to be re-established. Here are some incidents that might interrupt your cat’s pattern of using the litter box (see “auditioning solutions” on back for more possibilities):

- The litter box is kept in a room where the cat does not have access or access has been blocked.
- Your cat suffers from a urinary tract infection, which makes eliminating so painful he avoids urinating until he absolutely has to—when he is not near a litter box.
- Another pet had accidents in a room, and now it smells to your cat like that area can be used as a litter box.
- Your cat is aging or injured and now uncomfortable maneuvering in a covered litter box.
- There was not enough loose surface in the litter box (not cleaned enough).
- In a multi-cat household, one of the other cats was in the litter box at a point when it was needed.

Here are some common myths about litter box problems and more reasonable explanations:

My cat is jealous of our new baby.

Caring for your baby requires so much more of your time, you find less time to clean and change the litter.

My cat is angry at my boyfriend.

Your cat may be unsure about how to behave around your boyfriend, and in an effort to avoid him has been unable to get to the litter box in time.

My cat decided he wants to urinate in the bathtub.

Your cat discovered (because at some point he couldn’t get into his regular litter box in time) that eliminating on a flat surface is more comfortable.

PREVENTING A LITTER BOX PROBLEM

To help minimize the possibility of a litter box problem beginning, follow these general rules:

- Provide at least one litter box per cat **plus** one. So at a minimum you would provide 2 litter boxes. In a multi-cat household with 5 cats, you would provide 6 litter boxes.
- Provide one litter box per floor in your household. If you live in a 3-story house, there should be at least 3 litter boxes in the house—one on each floor.
- Scoop your litter box at least once each day. Empty and disinfect the box at least once a week.
- Avoid filling your box with too much litter as some cats find that “sinking” feeling unsettling.
- Use shredded paper or a chunkier litter with baby kittens. Avoid sand or clumping litter with them so it doesn’t get stuck in their little noses.

SOLVING AN EXISTING LITTER BOX PROBLEM

Visit your vet. Your first step in resolving any litter box issue—especially if this is a new behavior—is to rule out a medical problem. Talk with your veterinarian. If your cat urinates outside the box, ask for a urinalysis. Even if it doesn’t appear to be a medical problem, you could spend a lot of energy and resources trying to resolve a behavior problem being aggravated by a physical problem. If a medical problem exists and it is resolved by medication, your issue could be quickly resolved. If tests reveal there is no physical complication, continue the following steps.

Next Steps. Your next steps would be to minimize your cat’s environment. You might sequester your cat to one room during her rehabilitation or even a large dog crate or exercise pen if a room is too large. Your goal is to configure an area that leaves your cat minimal opportunities to have an accident. The less accidents your cat has, the more opportunities you provide for success, the more quickly you will arrive at your solution. Some cats spend 6 to 8 weeks in confinement healing from a physical injury, and you can certainly consider this a rehabilitation. If you live in a multi-pet household, it will be especially important to keep the cat separate from other pets to rule out the possibility that other household members are affecting the accidents. Keep in mind that we are not levying a punishment. This environment should be a pleasant, comfortable place for your cat to rest. The environment should include two litter boxes (ideally), food, water, toys and at least one cushy bed. Spend time playing with your cat in the area as well. If your cat is spending time in a crate, you may let him or her out for strictly supervised time in your well-protected room.

When the small environment is established, protect it from further soiling. Use a painter’s cloth to protect carpet, a waterproof mattress pad (remove the elastic if needed) to protect large furniture, and diapers or diaper changing pads to protect smaller areas. If your cat has an opportunity to soil his environment, it could impede his progress—as well as causing costly damage to your belongings.

Once your cat is in a secure learning environment, take this opportunity to scan your carpets, floors and furniture with a handheld black-light (at night in the dark) and an enzymatic cleaner (see suggested products). Urine stains should fluoresce under the light. Then you will know if you have found and cleaned all the accident areas in your house. While your cat is sequestered possibly for several days or weeks and your cleaned areas are drying, follow some or all of the options below to find your solution to your cat’s litter box problem. Remember to try each option for at least several days to determine whether or not your cat will be consistent. Incidentally, if your cat panics in a small environment, you may attempt to skip sequestering him. It does help minimize further problems and increase success while finding your solution if you can keep him confined.

AUDITIONING SOLUTIONS

Following are a few solutions to “audition” with your cat. If possible, use two litter boxes to give your cat an obvious choice.

- Un-scented litter
- Un-scented litter with baking soda mixed in
- Cat Attract (see suggested products)
- Different texture litters (see suggested products)
- Outside soil as litter—mixed with some clay litter
- Very shallow litter, no litter or flat newspaper
- A large storage box instead of a litter box
- A very shallow storage box lid
- A covered or an un-covered litter box
- A litter shield or no litter shield
- A litter box behind a chair
- A litter box out in the open

SPRAYING (a different sort of litter box problem). Spraying typically occurs on vertical surfaces—walls and curtains vs. floors and carpets—and is typically not a litter or litter box issue. Spraying is typically triggered by stress or hormones. Cats may spray if they find another cat has entered their territory, if they sense a female in heat, or in other stressful situations such as encountering a dog, or a drastic change in environment. A pheromonal air diffuser or spray (see suggested products) can help eliminate stress. Using boundary pellets or other methods to keep other pets off your property may help as well. Alternatively, cat “diapers” are available with elastic bands that wrap around the shoulders to keep them on. Reserve these for your final solution, as most cats clean frequently and don’t tolerate clothing well.

SUGGESTED PRODUCTS

- **Cleaning:** Nature’s Miracle, Simple Solution, Get Serious
- **Litters:** Shredded newspaper, clay litter, clumping clay litter, World’s Best Cat Litter, Yesterday’s News, Swheat Scoop, Feline Pine, Cat Attract
- **Litter accessories:** Dostocil Litter Locker, baking soda
- **Stress reducing:** Comfort Zone with Feliway, catnip, catnip spray
- **Miscellaneous:** Joybie’s Piddle Pants