

AUDITIONING LITTER BOX OPTIONS

If you have a cat who is not using your home's current litter box setup, providing the cat with various options can help you get a better idea of her preferences. Use this method in conjunction with reading the information provided in **Solving Litter Box Problems** and **Research Provides Tips for Litter Box Success**.

Because we cannot simply provide a visual catalog of options to our felines and have them place an order, we need a clever way to learn what characteristics are important to them. By offering a cat some choices side-by-side, we can find out which options the cat prefers. Think of it as a litter box smorgasbord. Having more than one box together in a room requires more space than your ultimate resolution, but each trial is only a temporary step. Remember, it is important we prioritize what kitty needs to comply with appropriate litter box use rather than what we might think is good.

Evaluate your cat's current litter box and learn more about options. Several online vendors and pet supply stores offer multiple types of box, litter, and litter additives. We will list several for consideration but realize that new products come on the market all the time.

As you go through the list, decide which characteristics you will offer as options. You will need to keep a simple chart to make notes over several days for each option. You can offer as many options as you have room for, but it will be best not to combine characteristics at once or you won't be able to tell which characteristic was the key to attracting kitty to use the box. The "score" can be tracked by the number of deposits made in each box, as well as your own observations of how comfortable your cat may appear using them. You may need to restrict your cat's living space during these trials for easier observation and to control her ability to use unwanted surfaces.

OVERALL SIZE

In general, a litter box should be large enough for the cat to enter and turn around in without touching the sides of the box. Most cats appear to prefer larger boxes because a box that is too small is uncomfortable for them. If your cat is avoiding the litter box, offer a larger option. Consider larger plastic storage boxes for very large cats or multiple cat households.

ENTRANCE DEPTH

Some cats have no issue with hopping into a box with tall sides, but senior, obese, or timid cats might find this problematic. There are boxes designed with one side much lower or with an angled entrance. It is possible to use a small saw or Dremel drill to remove some of the height of the wall on one side for easy access.

LID OR NO LID?

If your cat has been avoiding using a box with a cover, offer an additional box without a top. Cats like to be able to see what is happening around them while eliminating. If the cat has some concern about being trapped or startled in the enclosed box, an open box may be a welcomed option.

Some cats accidentally eliminate over the edges of a box (called urine overspray) or fling litter when covering after eliminating. If either issue has led to using a closed box, look for tall-sided boxes by Nature's Miracle, Frisco, or Modcat.

LITTERS

In general, we know most housecats prefer to eliminate a fine, sand-like material they can scratch easily. They don't want to sink into the substance too deeply, preferring about 1 to 3 inches of litter. However, you may want to offer multiple boxes with different depths of litter to find out if your cat has a different preference.

Most cats don't need a specific scent and appear to prefer unscented litter. We know that owners like a pleasant fragrance to control litter box odors but using strongly perfumed products may make your cat avoid the box. Try auditioning a lighter scent and/or mix baking soda into the litter to reduce odor. (Also, increase your scooping and replace the litter more often.) Providing two types of litter side-by-side may give you insight into how much your cat likes or dislikes a particular brand or smell.

If, for some reason, a kitten never gets a chance to use a typical litter box while growing up, the cat could develop a preference for whatever she learned to use. This would mean that cat may believe eliminating on fabric, or paper, or wood chips is normal. If you have a cat that seems to prefer an unusual substance, there are ways to retrain her to use litter. Offering the cat a box with shredded newspaper or old rags could help identify the preference. Then, little by little, adding litter to the box could help establish the substance owners would prefer the cat to use. This process might require the support of a pet behavior professional.

AUTOMATION

Several "auto-scooping" litter boxes are available on the market. Please beware that short-term convenience for owners sometimes leads to long-term problems. The movement and sounds produced by these machines often create fear or concern in the cat, causing her to avoid the device. If you think that is possible in your situation, offer your cat simple litter box options a distance away from the automated one and collect data for several days. If the cat is agreeable to using the regular litter box, the convenience of the auto-scooping litter box is not likely to be worth the complications.

LOCATION

If all the components of the litter box are agreeable to your cat, remember to consider whether the location of the box or boxes is what concerns your cat. If a cat feels vulnerable to becoming trapped in a litter box or in the room in which it resides, she may avoid going there. Perhaps the cat needs a spot where she has two escape paths in case a housemate (dog, cat, kid, etc.) blocks one way.

Another concern could be noises or activity that happen near the boxes. Even noises coming through walls from other rooms could affect your cat's feelings about going into the box. Avoid storing items too closely above the box, especially anything that could fall and startle the cat.