

SOLVING LITTER BOX PROBLEMS

Litter box issues can be very frustrating for cat guardians—but following the important guidance and advice below can help reduce those frustrations and resolve a cat’s litter box misuse.

Cats are naturally inclined to seek a loose, scratchable surface in which to do their business, so most cats acclimate to using a litter box quickly. Some cats, however, may go through a period in their lives when litter box use becomes less consistent, and that lack of consistency could be caused by a medical issue, inconsistent cleaning of the litter box or even an event the cat perceives to be scary.

If your cat normally has good litter box habits, a change in those habits deserves a rapid response:

- Consult your veterinarian. There are several medical issues that can affect a cat’s litter box habits. Urinary tract infections are one example. Some underlying medical reasons for inappropriate litter box use can be resolved quickly with appropriate medical treatment.
- Gather data. Taking notes on the days and times of the inappropriate eliminations, as well as type (urine or feces or both), quality (normal or loose or bloody), and quantity, will help you and your veterinarian identify the source of the issue.
- Thoroughly clean the area with an enzymatic cleaner. Read instructions and be careful not to negate the enzyme effect with harsher cleaners. Keep reading for recommended cleaners.
- If your cat eliminates on clothing or a throw rug, launder the item and keep it away for a while. And if it is possible to prevent your cat from entering the room where the mistake occurred for a few days, that is helpful.
- Be sure you are maintaining a clean, fresh litter box. Nobody likes a dirty toilet, including cats. See also “Research Provides Tips for Litterbox Success.”
- Evaluate whether your cat could be having physical challenges getting into or out of the current box. If you have a covered litter box, you may want to try an open one. If you have a small open box, you may want to offer your cat a larger, more comfortable box. See also “Auditioning Litter Box Options.”
- Play detective. Be mindful of anything unusual happening in the household. Guests, new pets, renovations, new appliances, parties, or furniture rearrangement – any of these may be upsetting enough to your cat to cause litter box avoidance. Investigate to see if the cat could have been prevented or dissuaded from reaching the litter box in some way. Have you switched to a different litter? Sometimes new scents or textures can cause avoidance.
- In multi-cat households, it may be necessary to observe interactions to detect if one cat is bullying or chasing the other around or near the litter box. Watch for one cat staring at another for long periods. It may even be difficult to determine which cat is not using the box unless you see her eliminating. Various home cameras can be set to catch box behavior or to record in a space that has been inappropriately used. Please refer to our other resources for assistance if this is the case.

Avoid falling for typical myths about cat behavior. A cat who is not using the litter box is not angry with you or someone else in the home, though she might be unhappy or scared of that person. Urinating in the bathtub is not done on purpose to “get back” at you; it is more likely the cat finds it safer or easier than her current litter box. Yelling or scolding the cat is more likely to further upset her and lead to more problems than to remedy the issue.

Once you have done each of the following, you will be ready to take the next steps to resolve the problem:

- Determine exactly which cat or cats are eliminating inappropriately,
- Make notes about each incident (for yourself and your veterinarian),
- Have your cat examined by a veterinarian to rule out an underlying medical issue, and
- Thoroughly clean each item and area that was soiled with appropriate cleaning products.

Your chances for success correcting litter box issues will be highest if you approach the situation the same way you would help an animal recover from an injury. Start by restricting your cat's environment to a smaller space where any accidents will be easier to clean. A bathroom or a large wire pet crate are two suggestions. The space needs to have room for food and water and at least one litter box, which should be kept extremely clean. You can use a drop cloth or tarp to cover soft surfaces.

Meet your cat's regular needs for attention, brushing, and play. Bring your cat out for short, supervised periods, but do not let her roam.

Keeping your cat by herself (if you have more than one cat) helps you make sure she is the one not using the litter box, and temporarily isolating her to a smaller space will help you determine whether she has a strong aversion to the litter box itself. If your cat uses the litter box in the smaller space, we know she understands what the box is for. We therefore will need to identify what contributed to her discomfort or avoidance of the box previously. See also "Auditioning Litter Box Options."

Take time during the confinement period to detect and completely clean any inappropriate elimination.

SPRAYING

If you find urine spots on vertical surfaces like walls, curtains, or sides of furniture, you do not have a litter box issue. Spraying is typically a reaction to stress or scents and pheromones rather than a litter box problem. Spraying is often triggered by an unfamiliar scent of an animal (another cat or dog as an example) entering a cat's territory or by females in heat. Spraying can also occur when your cat is stressed by significant changes in her environment. If you are experiencing this kind of urination, a behavioral consultation may be necessary.

SUGGESTED CLEANING PRODUCTS

The enzymes in enzymatic cleaners are designed to break down urine and feces. Prior to using such a cleaner, remove as much urine or feces from the affected area as possible prior to application. The area should be saturated with the product and allowed to work over several days. Do not use regular cleaners at the same time, as they can render the enzymes ineffective. Products are offered by Nature's Miracle, Simple Solution, Simple Green, and other companies.

Many other products use hydrogen peroxide or other ingredients to remove stains and deodorize. Some work better on certain fabrics or surfaces than others. Products are offered by Angry Orange, Anti Icky Poo, Bissell Pawsitively Clean, Fizzion, Zero Odor, and other companies.