

## Solving Litter Box Problems

Cats tend to have surface and location preferences for where, and on what, they like to eliminate. Most cats prefer a loose, sandy substance, which is why they will use a litter box. It's only when their preferences include the laundry basket, the bed, or the Persian rug, that normal elimination behavior becomes a problem. With careful analysis of your cat's environment, specific factors that have contributed to the litter box problem can usually be identified and changed, so that your cat will start using the litter box again.

### Why Is My Cat Doing This?

Cats do not stop using their litter boxes because they're mad or upset and are trying to get revenge. Sometimes, the initial reason for the problem is not the same reason it's continuing. For example, your cat may have stopped using the litter box because of a urinary tract infection, and then developed a surface preference for carpet and a location preference for the bedroom closet. You would need to address all three of these factors in order to resolve the problem.

**Medical Problems:** It's common for cats to begin eliminating outside of their litter box when they have a medical problem. For example, a urinary tract infection or crystals in the urine can make urination very painful. Cats often associate this pain with their box and begin to avoid it. If your cat has a house-soiling problem, check with your veterinarian first to rule out any medical problems for the behavior.

**Aversion to the Litter Box:** Your cat may have decided that the litter box is an unpleasant place to eliminate if:

- The box is not clean enough for her.
- She has experienced painful urination or defecation in the box due to a medical problem.
- She has been startled by a noise while using the box.
- She has been "ambushed" while in the box either by another cat, a child, a dog etc.
- She associates the box with punishment (someone punished her for eliminating outside the box and then placed her in the box).

To help your cat overcome an aversion:

- **Keep the litter box extremely clean.** Scoop at least once a day and change the litter completely every four to five days. If you use scoopable litter, you may not need to change the litter as frequently. This will vary according to how many cats are in the household, how many litter boxes you have, and how large the cats are that are using the box or boxes. A good guideline is that if you can smell the box, then you can be sure it's offensive to your cat.
- **Add a new litter box and use a different type of litter** in this box. Because your cat has decided that her old litter box is unpleasant, you'll want to make the new one different enough that she doesn't simply apply the old, negative associations to the new box.
- **Make sure the box is not near a noisy appliance** or in an area that your cat doesn't frequent.
- If ambushing is a problem, **create more than one exit from the litter box**, so that if the "ambusher" is waiting by one area, your cat has an escape route or find a way so that only the cat can enter the litter box area (such as using a baby gate that the dog or child cannot pass through but the cat can go under or over).
- **Make sure she can easily reach her litter box.** For example, if her age is preventing her from going upstairs, make sure there is a litter box on the main floor.

**Surface Preferences:** All animals develop preferences for a particular surface on which they like to eliminate. These preferences may be established early in life. Your cat may have a surface preference if:

- She consistently eliminates on a particular texture. For example: soft-textured surfaces, such as carpet, bedding or clothing, or slick-textured surfaces, such as tile, cement, bathtubs or sinks.
- She frequently scratches on this same texture after elimination, even if she eliminates in the litter box.
- She is or was previously an outdoor cat and prefers to eliminate on grass or soil.

To help your cat:

- If your cat is eliminating on soft surfaces, try using a **high quality, scoopable litter**, and put a soft rug under the litter box.
- If your cat is eliminating on slick, smooth surfaces, try putting just a **very thin layer of litter** at one end of the box, leaving the other end bare, and put the box on a hard floor.
- If your cat has a history of being outdoors, **add some soil or sod** to the litter box.
- Make the area where she has been eliminating **aversive to her** by covering it with an upside down carpet runner or aluminum foil, or by placing citrus-scented cotton balls over the area.

### **Other Types of House Soiling Problems**

**Marking/Spraying:** To determine if your cat is marking or spraying, please see our handout: “Reducing Urine Marking Behavior in Cats.”

**Fears or Phobias:** When animals become frightened, they may lose control of their bladder and/or bowels. If your cat is afraid of loud noises, strangers or other animals, she may house soil when she is exposed to these stimuli.

### **Cleaning Soiled Areas**

Because animals are highly motivated to continue soiling an area that smells like urine or feces, you should thoroughly clean the soiled areas. Using an enzymatic cleaner can help prevent the cat from targeting the same area.

### **Oops!**

Don't ever punish your cat for eliminating outside of the litter box. Do nothing but clean it up. Rubbing your cat's nose in it, taking her to the spot and scolding her, or any other type of punishment, will only make her afraid of you, afraid to eliminate in your presence, or have anxiety around the litter box. Punishment will likely do more harm than good.

**Need help? Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.**