

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.

Common Reasons Cats May Stop Using the Litter Box:

Medical Problems

It's common for cats to begin eliminating outside of their litter box when they have a medical issue. 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.

To help your cat: Check with your veterinarian first to rule out any underlying medical problems that could be the cause or be exacerbating 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 them.
- They have been startled by a noise while using the box.
- They have been “ambushed” while in the box either by another cat, a child, a dog etc.
- The box is being “guarded” by another cat and there are no alternative litter boxes.
- They associate the box with punishment (someone punished your cat for eliminating outside the box and then placed them in the box).

To help your cat avoid or overcome an aversion:

- **Keep the litter box extremely clean.** Scoop at least once a day and change the litter completely every other week (or more if it needs it). This will vary according to how many cats are in the household, how large the cats are, how many litter boxes you have and if you use clumping litter or not. A good guideline is that if you can smell the box, then you can be sure it's offensive to your cat.
- **Buy a new litter box and use a different type of litter in this box.** Because your cat has decided that the 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 your cat can easily reach the litter box.** If age is preventing your cat from going upstairs, place 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:

- They consistently eliminate on one type of texture, like soft-textured surfaces (carpet, bedding, clothing) or slick-textured surfaces (tile, cement, bathtubs, sinks).
- They frequently scratch on this same texture after elimination, even after eliminating in their litter box.
- They were previously an outdoor cat and prefer 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. To learn more about fear-based behavior, please read our handout [Your Fearful Cat](#).

Oops!

Thoroughly clean areas where your cat has previously eliminated. Because animals are attracted to an area that smells like urine or feces, **use an enzymatic cleaner** to thoroughly clean soiled areas.

Don't punish your cat for eliminating outside of the litter box. Simply clean it up. Rubbing your cat's nose in it, carrying them to the spot and scolding them, or using any other type of punishment will only make your cat afraid of you, afraid to eliminate in your presence, or have anxiety around the litter box. Punishment will do more harm than good.

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