



Solving Litter Box Problems

If you're having a hard time persuading your cat to use the litter box, it may be time to draw a line in the sand.

Most cats are happy to use a litter box because their instinct is to bury their urine and feces. But when their burying preferences include the laundry basket, the bed or the Persian rug, you've got a problem.

There's always a reason they stop using their box and it's not to make you mad or get revenge. Take a close look at what's going on in your cat's world. You should be able to uncover the source (or sources) of the trouble, and make the changes that will put his world to rights again.

The case of multiple cats: A whodunnit

If you only have one cat, it's obvious who's misbehaving. But what if you have more? You need to do some detective work.

It's a process of elimination, which means you will need to isolate one cat at a time to see if the inappropriate behavior stops while he's in isolation. This method isn't foolproof, however, because if the culprit's behavior is stress-induced (see below), it may not occur if keeping him away from the other cats also keeps him away from the stress!

For more puzzling cases, a veterinarian can advise you on adding a safe fluorescent dye to the cats' food (one cat at a time). The dye will glow in the cat's urine when a black light is held over it, and you'll have your culprit.

Now that you know who it is, what do you do about it?

Medical issues

If your male cat stops using the litter box, spends a lot of time trying to go or licking his genitals, get him to the vet immediately. This may be a sign that he has a urinary tract infection or much worse, a blockage. These cause pain when urinating, which he may associate with using the box, causing him to avoid it. Some cats will even urinate and cry right in front of you or go in the bathtub or sink to let you know something's wrong.

Urinary tract problems can be very serious, especially in male cats because their urethra (the tube that empties urine from their bladder) is narrow and is more easily plugged than a female's wider urethra. A cat whose urinary tract is blocked can die within hours or suffer irreversible organ damage from the buildup of toxins in his system. Don't wait around thinking it will clear up by itself. And don't be fooled into thinking that your cat is constipated. It could happen, but it's more likely to be a urinary problem.

If your kitty gets a clean bill of health from the vet, his problem is all in his head.

Why, why, why?

Many cats are perfectly happy with everything about their litter boxes and don't care what how many there are, where they are, or what's in them. Then there are those who are more picky. These cats may have any number of reasons (known only to them) for deciding the litter box is an unpleasant place to eliminate.

- The box isn't clean enough.
- She doesn't like the box: It's too big, too small, too high, too low, has a hood, doesn't have a hood, is too hard to get into and so on.
- She doesn't like the litter: It's clay, it's clumping, scented, unscented, too hard, too soft, she doesn't like litter at all, there's too much, not enough, etc.
- She doesn't like the location: It's out in the open, too hard to get to, next to a noisy appliance, in the basement when she wants it in the living room, etc.
- She's too young, too old or too unwell to make it to the basement to use the box.
- She was startled by something or someone or "ambushed" by another pet while she was in it.
- There aren't enough boxes for the number of cats you have.
- Something in her environment or routine has changed. She's anxious and is marking her territory to reassure or assert herself.
- She associates the box with punishment. (For example, someone punished her for eliminating outside the box, and then placed her in it.)

Sometimes, the original reason for the problem may not be the reason it's continuing.

For example, your cat may have stopped using the litter box because of a urinary tract infection; the infection is gone, but she now prefers the carpet or the bedroom closet. If that's the case, you'll need to address all of these factors to resolve the problem.

The road to recovery

You think you've figured out what's put kitty's tail in a twist; now let's fix it.

Move it

If your cat was just fine with her litter box situation, but is now unhappy because you've changed something about it, by all means, change it back!

If your cat always eliminates in quiet, protected places, such as under a desk, beneath a staircase, in a corner, or in a closet; she eliminates in an area where the litter box was previously kept or where there are urine odors; or she eliminates on a different level of the home, here are some solutions.

- Put a litter box in the location where your cat's been eliminating. When she has consistently used this box for at least one month, you may gradually move it to a more convenient location at a rate of an inch—seriously!—per day.
- Put at least one litter box on every level of your home. (Remember, a properly cleaned litter box does not smell.) This is especially important if you have kittens, elderly, or ill cats who don't have the strength to go all the way to the basement each time they need to use the box.
- To make the spots where she's been eliminating less appealing to your cat, cover them with upside-down carpet runner or aluminum foil, place citrus-scented cotton balls over the areas, or place water bowls there (because cats often don't like to eliminate near where they eat or drink).

Clean house

Clean the soiled areas well. Animals are highly motivated to continue soiling an area that smells like urine or feces. A cat's sense of smell is much stronger than a human's, so it's important to clean the soiled areas thoroughly and properly.

Find urine stains with a fluorescent black light, available at hardware and pet supply stores. The stains will glow under the black light. Once you locate a stain, clean it with an enzymatic cleaner made especially for pet odors, available at pet supply stores. Don't use ammonia or other strong-smelling household cleaners. These will encourage your cat to re-mark in that area.

You may have to clean the area several times to remove the odor completely, even treating the carpet padding and subflooring underneath. Clean the area thoroughly before steam cleaning to avoid "locking in" the odor.

Surfaces

All animals develop preferences for a particular surface on which they like to eliminate. These preferences may be established early in life, but they may also change overnight for reasons that we don't always understand. Your cat may have a surface preference if she consistently eliminates on a particular texture—for example, soft things like carpeting, bedding, or clothing, or smooth surfaces such as tile, cement, bathtubs, or sinks. Or maybe she frequently scratches on this same texture after elimination, even if she eliminates in the litter box. Sometimes a previously outdoor-only cat prefers to eliminate on grass or soil.

If your cat is eliminating on soft surfaces, try using a soft litter made of pine shavings. You could also try shredded newspaper, or even a piece of carpet in the box (you'll have to change it often, of course). Try to convert her to litter by sprinkling it over the carpet, gradually adding more if she doesn't object.

If your cat's eliminating on slick, smooth surfaces, try giving her an empty box or putting a very thin layer of litter at one end of the box. Leave the other end bare, and put the box on a hard floor.

If your cat has a history of being outdoors, use dirt.

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About Napa Humane

The Humane Society of Napa County and SPCA, known as Napa Humane, is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1973. Recognizing that companion animals are an important part of healthy communities, we've grown to consider Napa Humane a community service organization. Our programs and services are designed to address the needs of animals – and also to provide support, education, and assistance for all the people who care for and about them.

Napa Humane is a private and independent organization that is supported by private donations by individuals and businesses, bequests, and fees for service. We receive no government funding, tax dollars or funding from national animal welfare organizations.

Our Mission

To promote the welfare of companion animals through protection, advocacy, education, and by example.