

cat litter box issues

basic feline care

To us, nothing is simpler. You buy a litter box, put it on the floor, fill it up and the cat uses it. What's not to like? Ask the cat!

Litter box:

Finicky felines have a very sensitive sense of smell to go with their sensitive dispositions. They are easily upset by changes in their environment and can't tell you what is bothering them. These facts sometimes add up to create an upset cat that won't use a litter box. You may have to wade through a lot of possibilities until you find a solution.

Litter box issues:

Dirty litter box?

Cats are meticulously clean and cannot tolerate the smell or feel of a dirty box. Scoop the box at least once a day, more often if you have more than one cat.

Need more litter boxes?

Provide at least one litter box for every cat in your household plus one more, which helps prevent territorial disputes.

If your house is large, provide a box at each end of the house. If you have two stories and a basement, put a box on each floor. If your cat is old, it may be difficult for them to go up and down stairs.

Wrong box?

Is your cat still a kitten? Maybe the sides of the box are too high and your cat needs a shorter pan. Is it difficult for your older cat to jump out of the litter box? If your cat is large and using a small or hooded box, it may be too crowded.

Not enough privacy?

Cats don't want to be bothered while they



Developed with and approved by a qualified veterinarian.

use the box. It's an important ritual to be able to scratch, bury, sniff and turn in a thousand circles before using it. If the dryer suddenly roars to life or a bunch of noisy kids go zooming through the room, your cat may find a new place to eliminate. If cats don't feel safe, they won't stay there. Sometimes a screen in front of the box or a hooded cover helps your cat feel more secure.

Is the dog bothering the litter box? Put up a baby gate or a small pet door that is too little for the dog to get through.

Medical issues:

Medical problem?

A physical ailment may cause your cat pain while eliminating. Your cat could associate that discomfort with the litter box and choose another place to go. Some possibilities are: urinary tract infection, kidney failure, diabetes or constipation. Your first step should be a trip to the veterinarian to rule out any health problems.

Recently declawed?

Declawing should be a last resort due to the number of more humane options (nail caps, various cat scratching post and furniture options, deterrent sprays, etc.) to stop cats from scratching furniture. If you have just had your cat declawed your cat may associate the sore feet and bandages with the litter box and refuse to use it. Doctors often recommend temporarily using shredded newspaper instead of sand so that bits of litter won't get into the incisions. Most cats get over the recovery period just fine, but some have a hard time adjusting. Your veterinarian may recommend giving your cat an anti-anxiety or pain-relieving drug temporarily. Do not use over-the-counter medications on your cat; instead, obtain a prescription from your veterinarian.

Is your cat spayed or neutered?

If not, get it done right away. A female cat in season or a sexually frustrated male may not use the litter box, and may even start spraying urine around the house. It's a habit that is easier to prevent than it is to break. If prowling

cats are outside, your indoor cat may be aware of them and react to the stress.

Changes:

Has anything changed around the house?

"Anything" really does mean any little thing. Cats are easily disrupted. Do you have a new pet? Especially if it's a cat, introduce them as slowly and stress-free as possible. If you have a new dog, let them smell each other through a door for a few days. Then introduce them with the dog on-leash. If the cat can be persuaded not to run, the dog has nothing to chase, and they will get off on the right foot. (Petco offers Care Sheets on this topic.)

A new baby? Let your cat smell baby blankets and other smells to get used to the new person. A new adult in the household? Same routine. Let your cat get used to their scent and slowly meet the newcomer on your cat's own schedule. Try to introduce changes gradually and one at a time.

Is company coming? Your cat notices the flurry of activity beforehand and may not be used to children, adults with booming voices or even just the extra activity around the house. Try to keep your cat's routine as unchanged as possible and prevent your guests from interfering with your cat's private resting areas.

Have you changed anything about the litter box?

If a new arrival resulted in moving the cat's litter box, food or sleeping area, your cat may be upset. Gradually make changes a week or two in advance so your cat doesn't associate it with guests, and try to move one thing at a time instead of everything at once.

If the store is out of your brand of litter, try to get something as similar as possible. Suddenly introducing scented or clumping litter may cause an upset in your cat's routine. Introducing liners or deodorizers that your cat isn't used to can cause issues as well.

Cleanup and prevention:

Treat pet stains with an enzyme odor remover.

After cleaning, cover the spot with foil or waxed paper, which will discourage your cat from returning. You can put your cat's food dish or even an extra litter box in that spot. Gradually move the box or food back to its original place, moving it just a foot or so a day.

Other methods to discourage your cat from returning to that spot: ultrasonic devices emit an annoying noise that humans cannot hear each time your pet gets near the spot; spray-on repellents will irritate your cat's sensitive nose and act as a deterrent; and mothballs will also deter your pet.

An anti-anxiety medication given for a few weeks may solve the problem and get your cat back on the right track. Consult your veterinarian to find out if this is the best option for your cat.

If all else fails, contact your nearest veterinary specialty hospital or university and ask them to recommend a behaviorist for consultation. Once the problem is solved, you can enjoy a happy relationship with your cat for many years.