

## Why Is My Cat Going Outside The Litterbox?

### Litter box issues

#### **Box Size and Number**

A kitten-sized cat litter box is right for kittens. Adult cats should have adult-sized boxes. Once your cat is big enough, it's time to graduate to an adult size.

If you have more than one kitty in the house, it's probably best to get an extra-large box (more than one as we'll discuss below). In my experience though, even with one cat, the extra-large size seems to allow for the right amount of litter.

If you have a very large cat, say over 18 lbs., or a "swisher" that tends to throw litter around, you can get a larger plastic tub and use that as a litter box. Rubbermaid makes quality containers that won't bend or twist too much under the weight of litter or cat paws, and they tend to have high sides. Larger containers with higher sides also help with overspray from those cats who like to urinate up against the side of the box.

The downside is there is no cut out for entry/exit, so if your cat has a mobility problem this may not work. In order to make it is easier on your cat, whether or not there is a mobility problem, you can set up a ramp, some steps, or get one of the litter box furniture options that has a ramp built-in.

#### **The all-important one plus one rule:**

The question that everyone should ask themselves is "how many litter boxes should I have?"

The answer is that you should have one box for every cat in the house, plus one extra. This is known as the one plus one rule and should be followed even if you have only one cat.

There are several reasons for this. First, cats usually like their boxes to be clean. While some cats won't complain too much, many cats won't even use a box that has just been used, even if they were the one to use it last. Some cats like to urinate in one box and defecate in the other. So, having an extra box helps with this.

In single cat households, two cat litter boxes mean each one is usually cleaner more of the time. It also means that in a large house, your cat doesn't have far to go to reach a box. This can be important as your cat ages and becomes less active or develops mobility problems due to arthritis or some other condition.

In multi-cat households, one box for each cat plus one additional box means again, that each box stays cleaner, and there is always an alternative box to use that may not have been recently visited. More on multi-cat litter box issues below.

#### **Box Placement**

Location, location, and... location! Just as in real estate, it's all about location. This piece of kitty real estate needs to be placed in the right spot. Placing the box in the wrong spot can lead to litter box problems.

### **There are a number of "no no's" when it comes to cat litter box placement:**

- too close to the food or water bowls
- too close to high traffic areas
- too close to noisy areas
- too out of the way or difficult to get to
- placed on the wrong surface

The above seems obvious, but some people fail to realize that cats don't eliminate where they eat. They also don't like lots of activity or noise where they eliminate. In addition, if you put a cat litter box in a location that your cat doesn't frequent, they may be reluctant to use it.

General speaking, bathrooms, laundry rooms, and kitchens are probably not good areas to place the box. Bathrooms are not only busy, but sometimes the door is closed, restricting access to the box. Laundry rooms have detergent and bleach smells that cats dislike, in addition to noisy machinery. Yet, time and time again, these are the locations that people often use for the box.

I'm not saying that these places can't be used. It's just that many people use places that end up being too busy or noisy to be viable. Then, when their cat stops using the box, they wonder why. Sometimes it's difficult to know why these problems occur, but other times it's crystal clear.

#### **So, where should the boxes be placed?**

Each litter box should be placed in an area of the house that your cat frequents, but one that is not too busy. The area should be quiet, away from the food and water bowls, and preferably should allow for multiple escape routes.

Also, there are some cats who will prefer that the box is placed on a hard surface, such as a tile floor rather than carpeting. Some cats will prefer to actually push the litter aside, and defecate on the hard bottom of the cat box, then cover it up. This is common with longer haired cats. If your cat has issues with inappropriate elimination, try changing the surface the box is placed on.

#### **Cleaning the Box:**

Your cat has a sensitive nose. You need to keep the box clean if you want to prevent litter box aversion. It's also healthier for you and your cat, so it's in your best interest to have the cleanest cat litter box you can have.

If you're using clumping litter, you should scoop each box at least once per day. Add new litter when needed to replace the litter you remove with each scoop. Every so often, dump all the litter, clean and dry the box, and start over with fresh litter.

This can be done every 3 to 6 weeks or so, depending on box usage. When you clean the box, you can use a bleach solution for sanitizing, but make sure there are no residual bleach or detergent smells when you're done.

## **Top Reasons Your Cat Won't Use the Box**

- **Box placement, size, and type.** Easy entry and exit, proximity to food, covered or uncovered, large or small, it all matters to the feline of the house. The box should be in a quiet location, have easy entry and exit, be of the right size, and away from food and water bowls.
- **Move to a new home.** All felines are extremely territorial. Try to make any move to a new location as easy on your cat as possible.
- **Dirty litter box.** The litter box has to be cleaned to your cat's specifications, and they have a sensitive nose. Cats also do not like strong smells such as citrus or bleach so make sure you rinse the box really well when you clean it.
- **Too few litter boxes for the number of cats in the house.** One box for each cat plus one more box is the recommendation from experts. Also make sure there is a box on every level of your home.
- **A dislike of the texture of the litter**
- **New brand of litter introduced.** When introducing a new brand of litter, do it slowly. If a problem develops, switch back to the old litter.
- **Threats from an outside cat.** This can be as subtle as a stray cat hanging around in the yard and can disturb even an indoor cat.
- **Disagreement with housemate.** If your cat is constantly ambushed by another cat or dog in the house when using the cat box, a problem could develop. Also, general tensions and aggressions between housemates can sometimes play out as litter box issues.
- **Household renovations.** The noise and disruption of work being done on the house can induce a high level of stress in your cat.
- **New cat, dog, or person added to the household.**
- **Change in owner's schedule.** Your cat may be sensitive to changes in your routine.

**Medical problems** or conditions such as a urinary tract infection, impacted anal glands, feline constipation, or parasites such as worms.

- **Physical discomfort when entering or exiting the litter box.** If your cat has arthritis or hip issues,

injury or some sort of strain, or other condition causing pain or weakness. Senior cats are especially susceptible to mobility problems.

Cats can develop a preference for texture and location at any time. Punishment often makes the problem worse, and patience is essential to solving the problem. So, if your cat suddenly decides to use your living room floor for a cat box, don't punish. Stress of some sort due to a change in environment, routine, and so on is a major cause of cat box problems.

**Remember that if a medical problem is the root cause, you cannot solve the problem until it is addressed.** Also keep in mind that once the medical problem is solved, there will be behavioral issues and litter box retraining to deal with. Your job is to reduce the stress and/or reverse the preferences that have developed.

Solving cat litter box problems can be a challenge. Anything from an illness to stress can throw your cat off her routine. Inappropriate elimination is the number one reason that adult cats are brought shelters. I find this deeply disturbing.

I cannot stress enough that these problems can often be solved and may involve a physical problem that you cannot detect. Your veterinarian needs to be involved in the discussion, and physical problems ruled out before you approach the behavioral issues.

You should be aware that even the most well-adjusted cat can be thrown off by stress. Stress can come from many sources, including a change in household routine, the addition of a family member or pet, or the death of another pet. Even changing the amount of attention your cat receives can put stress on your cat.

### **Tips and Tricks for Resolving Cat Litter Box Problems:**

- Always have your cat checked by a vet as there could be an unseen health issue involved. No amount of behavioral retraining will work if this is the case, and it could be serious.
- There are a host of medical problems that could be at fault, such as limited mobility in a sick or older cat, or urinary tract infection, or constipation or bowel problem for example. These problems will need to be addressed first before progress will be made. Some physical problems, such as mobility, may involve getting a different type of litter box as well.
- Use the Well-Done approach. Don't scold your cat for doing what nature is forcing her to do, even if she's doing it where you don't want her to. Instead, praise her when she does what you want.
- Cats do not like loud noises, crowded spaces, and high traffic areas for "doing their business." Place the litter box in a quiet, always accessible, less frequently used area of the house.
- Follow the one plus one rule. Some cats just can't stand a box that was recently used. This is true even if they were the last (and only) cat to use it. One box for each cat in the house, plus one additional box.

- Clean the box often and clean it well.
- Use unscented clumping litter. Many cats don't like the perfume in scented litters, still others don't like anything that doesn't feel like sand between the toes. Pellets, crystals, and wood chips don't feel like dirt, and your cat may not like it.
- Clean the area where your cat is pooping and peeing with Atmosklear or an enzymatic cleanser designed to remove urine and pet odor. Once a cat chooses an area to go in, they'll keep coming back and it's hard to break that cycle.
- Break the cycle by putting barriers up so your cat can't get to the "favorite wrong spot."
- After thoroughly cleaning the bad area, put tin foil or down on the floor to discourage your cat from walking there. Cats typically hate to walk on those materials. You can try marking off most of the floor with double sided tape or tinfoil and leave a path. Then put a litter box right there in the open path where your cat usually wants to make a mess. Or... feed your cat in that area. Cats won't normally go where they eat if they can help it.
- Sometimes retraining may be necessary. Using a crate or metal cage is one way to retrain your cat to use a litter box. Put your cat in the crate with a litter box, food and water. When your cat uses the litter box, let him/her out for a little while as a reward. Play with him/her and show affection. Then put your cat back in. Allow your cat to stay out longer each time but monitoring your cat while out of the crate. Leave the crate door open while your cat is out playing just in case the cat needs to use the box. You may want to locate the cage in an area that you will eventually be placing the litterbox after the re-training is over. This could take a few days or weeks depending on your cat.

If a physical problem was the cause of the behavior, then retraining may still need to take place once the medical issue is resolved. In any case, the retraining process may take weeks, and you must be consistent in order to help your cat modify her behavior. Again, cat litter box problems are often fixable, but you must be dedicated and patient with your kitty.