

# Solving Litter Box Problems

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## Introduction

A common reason why cats do not use the litter box is an aversion to the box, such as dislike of a covered box or dissatisfaction with the depth of the litter. Two other common reasons your cat may avoid the litter box are a preference for a particular type of litter not provided in the box or a preference for a particular location where there is no box.

using their litter box out of revenge or anger towards their caregivers. Because humans act for these reasons, it's easy for us to assume that our pets do as well. Animals do not act out of spite or revenge, so it will not help to punish your cat or give her special privileges in the hope that she will start using the litter box again.

Sometimes the problem is a combination of all three factors. To get to the answer, you will need to do a little detective work—and remember, the original source of 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, and then developed a surface preference for carpet and a location preference for the bedroom closet. If that's the case, you will need to address all three of these factors to resolve the problem.

It is common for cats with medical problems to begin eliminating outside of their litter boxes. For example, a urinary tract infection or crystals in the urine can make urination very painful—and both are serious conditions that require medical attention. Cats often associate this pain with the litter box and begin to avoid it. So if your cat has a house-soiling problem, check with your veterinarian first to rule out any medical problems as a cause of the behavior. Cats do not always act sick even when they are, and only a trip to the veterinarian for a thorough physical examination and laboratory tests can rule out a medical problem.

Despite popular belief, cats do not stop

As with any abnormality, starting a journal can be very helpful to solving litter box problems. You need to be proactive: look at your cat's urinary habits as often as possible so that you can keep track of what is going on. Another advantage of keeping a journal is that you can monitor the progress of the treatment plan.

In your journal record:

\*When does it happen

\*Where does it happen

\*What does it look like

\*Frequency

\*Any precipitating factors (boarding, surgery, cat fight, etc)

One final note is you will need time and patience. It can sometimes take 6 to 12 months to correct a behavioral problem. The key is not to give up.

## Multi-Cat Households

The social system for cats is very different from dogs. Cats are solitary hunters and therefore have less of a need for an elaborate social hierarchy to resolve conflicts. Cats do not use dominance and submissive signals in the same way dogs do. Inter-cat aggression is mainly an issue of space or territory, not social status.

Tension between two or more cats can progress to aggression between the two cats. The most common type of poten-

tially aggressive behavior that cats exhibit towards family members is play. The lack of hissing, growling and screaming is fairly unique for this behavior and can usually be used to differentiate play-fighting from the more serious types of aggression, such as territorial or fear-induced aggression. Aggression between cats can cause anxiety. This can result in inappropriate urination and marking by either the aggressor or victim.

If you have an inter-cat aggression issue in your household, you should contact a feline behaviorist. There are many variables that need to be addressed in this type of situation and is beyond the scope of this handout. It can take up to a year to resolve an inter-cat issue and sometimes the problem may not be fixable. In rare cases, finding a new home for one of the cats can be the only humane course of action.

# Preventing Litter Box Problems

## Summary of the Preferred Litter Box

- \*Use large, uncovered, clean boxes with no liners and sides low enough for your cat*
- \*Use sandy, scoopable litter with no special scents, about 1.5 inches deep*
- \*Have more than one box and at least one on every floor*
- \*Put the boxes where there is privacy, safety and escape potential*
- \*Keep the boxes away from your cat's food, sleeping area and any noisy appliances*
- \*Keep the boxes as clean as you would like your cat to be*

Some cats couldn't care less what kind of box you provide, while others would rather die than use that expensive, gorgeous box you just bought.

Here are some helpful hints about what most cats like or don't like.

You should have at least as many litter boxes as you have cats. That way, none of them will ever be prevented from eliminating in the litter box because it's already occupied. You might also consider placing litter boxes in several locations around the house, so that no one cat can prevent the other cats from getting access. We also recommend that you place at least one litter box on each level of your house.

Many cats prefer OPEN BOXES, although there are many cats who will put up with covers. A covered litter box traps odors inside, so it will need to be cleaned more often than an open one. A dirty, covered litter box is to your cat what a portapotty is to you! A covered litter box may make it easier for another cat to lay in wait and ambush the user as she exits the box; on the other hand, a covered litter box may feel more private, and timid cats may prefer it.

**KEEP THE LITTER BOX CLEAN!!!!** A good rule of

thumb, is to scoop daily and clean weekly. Some cats may require more frequent cleaning. Do not use strong smelling chemicals or cleaning products when washing the litter box, as doing so may cause your cat to avoid the box. Also, some cleaning products can be toxic to cats. Washing with soap and water should be sufficient.

Some cats do not mind having a plastic LINER in the litter box, while others do. Again, you may want to experiment to see if your cat is bothered by a liner in the box. If you do use a liner, make sure it is anchored in place, so it can not easily catch your cat's claws or be pulled out of place.

LOCATION of the litter box is also important. Quiet is best. Choose a place away from daily traffic and appliances that make noise and is relatively private. The ideal box location is a private place that feels safe and has "escape potential". Cats want to know if someone or something is entering the room, and want somewhere to go quickly if they feel threatened. Be sure the boxes are easily accessible. Have at least one box per floor. In multi-cat households, be aware that some cats guard spaces or boxes as territory, so make sure one cat isn't preventing another cat

access to the box.

Research has shown that most cats prefer fine-grained LITTERS, presumably because they have a softer feel. But high-quality, dust-free, clay litters are relatively small-grained and may be perfectly acceptable to your cat. Once you find a litter your cat likes, stick with it. Buying the least expensive litter or the brand that's on sale any given week could result in your cat not using the litter box. Most cats prefer about an inch and a half of litter, so be sure that you're not using too much.

Also, many cats are put off by the ODOR of scented or deodorant litters. For the same reason, it is not a good idea to place a room deodorizer or air freshener near the litter box. A thin layer of baking soda placed on the bottom of the box will help absorb odors without repelling your cat, and odors should not really be a problem if you keep the litter box clean. If you find the litter box odor offensive, your cat probably finds it even more offensive and will not want to eliminate there. If you have an asthmatic cat, you should avoid using baking soda and deodorant litters.

## Feline Behaviorists

- Moongazer—Lisa McCluskey 1-217-344-9115
- Autumn Gold Dog Training Center—Linda and Michael Case  
1-217-586-4864

## Websites

- ASPCA.com
- Patricia McConnell, PhD  
[www.dogsbestfriendtraining.com](http://www.dogsbestfriendtraining.com)
- [petsforlife.org](http://petsforlife.org)

# Treating Litter Box Problems

First of all, NEVER PUNISH your cat for going outside the litter box. It is not effective and can actually cause a lot of harm.

## STEP ONE:

Schedule an appointment with your cat's veterinarian. Your cat may have a medical problem that needs to be addressed prior to proceeding to the next step. If left untreated, the problem will get worse.

## STEP TWO:

Neuter or spay your cat. Intact female and male cats are famous for spraying, and it can be very difficult to convince them to stop when their hormones are telling them otherwise.

## STEP THREE:

As with any problem, starting a journal can be very helpful to solving litter box problems. You need to be proactive: look as often as possible so that you can keep track of what is going on. Another advantage of keeping a journal is that you can monitor the progress of the treatment plan.

In your journal record:

- \*When does it happen
- \*Where does it happen
- \*What does it look like
- \*Frequency

## STEP FOUR:

Neutralize first, then clean. Some detergents used to clean will actually set in the odor of urine. Cats are influenced by chemical signals when deciding where to go, and any area that has been used previously acts as an attractant for more use. You may have to get down on your hands and knees and smell deep in the carpets. If

you can smell it, then surely your cat will not miss it. Another way to detect urine stains is a black light. Once you have found all the areas where the cat is going, then you need to neutralize the area. Some examples of neutralizers are "Nature's Miracle", "Outright", or "FON". You can also mix 1/2 cup baking soda in 1/2 gallon of water. DO NOT use detergent, bleach or vinegar. After soaking up all the urine, pour the neutralizer on the entire stain and let it dry. If you can still smell urine, repeat until you can no longer smell the urine. If you have old urine stains, dilute the area with water first. If this does not get rid of the smell, you may have to get rid of the object your cat is urinating on. If this means new carpet or furniture and you want to prevent the cat from urinating on the new items, you can prevent access by keeping the cat out of the room or using aversives (see next page). If your cat has been going on an object that smells even faintly of urine, you are going to have a difficult time changing his habits until you remove the smell.

## STEP FIVE:

Re-evaluate the litter box situation. Review "Prevention" on the previous page. Evaluate accessibility, privacy, escape potential, type of litter, type of box, number of boxes, and location of boxes. You may have to offer several more litter boxes and experiment with location, types of litter, etc. Once the cat is using the boxes exclusively then you can start gradually reducing the number of boxes.

## STEP SIX:

Develop a plan for "problem" areas. There are 3 different

methods for preventing the old habit from recurring. (1) Chemically "remark" the areas with smells inappropriate for bathrooms. Putting the cat's food and water in the areas. Making the areas a "play" area or sleep area (bed). (2) Physically blocking access to the area—see Aversives. (3) Put a litter box where the cat is going. Once he starts going in the box you can slowly move the box into an appropriate location.

## STEP SEVEN:

Eliminate stress. Your cat may be reacting to a "psychosocial" stimulus. He is marking his territory in response to some external stimulus related to his social system or territory. This is where you need to do some investigating. Are there critters in your yard? Multi-cat household? New family members—human or animal? Lack of exercise?

## STEP EIGHT:

Confine the cat. This may be for a few days or up to 3 weeks. It should be a small room with food water and a box. Then gradually re-introduce to the rest of the house.

## STEP NINE:

Aroma therapy. Feliway replicates the scent from the cheek glands of relaxed and mellow cats. It works by surrounding your cat with the smell of relaxation and contentment.

## STEP TEN:

Anti-anxiety medications. Your veterinarian can discuss these options with you.



### *Treatment Plan Summary*

*\*Keep a journal and accurately observe and record your cat's behavior.*

*\*Be sure your cat does not have a medical problem by scheduling an exam with your veterinarian immediately.*

*\*Spay/Neuter*

*\*Neutralize the scent in all areas where your cat has urinated.*

*\*Follow the preferred litter box plan.*

*\*Prevent access to problem areas*

*\*Eliminate social stresses that might elicit territorial scent marking*

*\*Feliway or Anti-anxiety medications.*

## Scent Marking

House cats have evolved as territorial animals who exclude members of their own species that are not part of their immediate social group. Like many territorial animals, cats leave urine and feces to communicate to other cats about the boundaries of their territory.

There are many reasons why cats begin scent marking. Scent marking is most often performed by intact males, but unsprayed females mark as well. A stray cat showing up in the yard, tension between 2 or more

cats in the same household, or even the smell of a new couch or carpet can elicit scent marking.

If your cat is spraying—backing up to a vertical surface, raising his or her tail, paddling the front paws, and spraying urine straight backwards—you can assume the motivation is scent marking. However, “puddles” of urine can be motivated by medical problems, aversion to the box, or scent marking.

Sometimes, we can not tell exactly what is motivating a cat to go outside the litter box, but often the location of the “accidents” can provide a lot of information. This is where a journal is very helpful in uncovering the motivation behind the behavior.

## Aversives

There are a variety of aversives used to prevent or discourage your cat from urinating inappropriately. Aversives are used in addition to all the other recommendations mentioned in “treatment” section. Aversives will not work if you do not follow the other recommendations. While you are doing everything possible to encourage your cat to use the litter box, simultaneously make it less inviting to eliminate anywhere except the box.

Blocking access to a problem area can be accomplished by a variety of methods. The simplest is to restrict access to a room. Use upside down toothed carpet runners or sticky pa-

per to cover the area. Remember to make sure the area is neutralized completely. If not, when you remove the barriers, your cat will continue to urinate there. Smells and tastes can be aversives, however, you need to make sure they are safe. Discuss options with your veterinarian before using any of these products. Other physical barriers can be combined with a loud noise such as a tower of empty aluminum cans precariously balanced on a towel. This works well for couches and chairs. When the cat knocks it down it’s loud but will not hurt him. Other distractions include snappy trainer, scat mat, and motion detector.

Finally, you can get actively in-

involved, but make sure the cat does not see you when you do this. You can use a spray bottle or loud horn. This distracts the cat from the behavior. This kind of technique can be tricky and can backfire if not done correctly.

Aversives, when used correctly, can aid in changing a behavior. If, after following all of the recommendations in the prevention and treatment sections, the cat is still urinating inappropriately, a consultation with a certified feline behaviorist is recommended.

## Counter Conditioning

Counter conditioning means conditioning or training an animal to display a behavior that is counter to (mutually exclusive of) an unacceptable behavior in response to a particular stimulus. Counter conditioning is teaching a different task or behavior than the one that was previously occurring in a situation. For example, some multi-cat households have cats that do not get along. One cat (we’ll call him Tom) always “picks on” another cat (we’ll call him Jerry). Every time Tom sees Jerry he attacks him. What counter conditioning does is

retrains Tom to not attack Jerry by associating Jerry with something good. Start with giving Tom a treat as soon as he looks at Jerry. After a few days, put it with a command “Where’s Jerry?” and when he finds him give him a treat. Over time Tom will associate Jerry with a yummy treat, something he loves.

Keep in mind this is a very simplified explanation. NEVER attempt counter conditioning without supervision by a trained behaviorist. You may end up making the situation worse

### Sources:

- ◆ *The Fastidious Feline: How to prevent and treat litter box problems*  
By: Patricia B. McConnell, PhD
- ◆ *Pets For Life Handouts Solving Litter Box Problems*  
*Introducing your cat to the Litter Box*