

Litter Box Problems

Cats may develop litter box problems for a variety of reasons including: painful urination or defecation in the litter box due to a previous or current medical condition, a scary event occurring while the cat was using the litterbox (e.g. sudden loud noise), blocked access to the litter box caused by another pet in the home, a conflict with another cat in the home, a change made to the household or a sudden change made to the litter box (e.g. addition of another pet, moving to a new home, litter box moved or litter type changed too quickly), an insufficient number of litter boxes, inconvenient placement of the litter box or boxes, a dislike for the type of litter in the box, the litter box(es) are not cleaned often enough, an insufficient amount of litter in the box, a litter box that is too small for the cat or not easily accessed by the cat due to age-related physical ailments, or a litter box that may be too confining for the cat because it is covered.

The following recommendations will help resolve litter box problems.

Resolving litter box problems

- 🐾 Rule out any potential medical condition by having your cat checked out by your veterinarian. Even one painful experience in the litter box may cause a cat to stop using it, or just use it for either defecation or urination depending on which caused the initial pain.
- 🐾 Change any negative association your cat has developed with the litter box, perhaps due to a previous medical condition or fearful event, by adding one to two litter boxes that are a different size or shape. Try placing a different type of litter in one of the boxes. Also, place them in different locations. It is better to add litter boxes than to remove or make sudden changes to existing litter boxes because drastic changes are stressful to cats. Try playing with your cat near the litter box, and place treats and toys around the box. Do not place your cat's food bowl around the litter boxes because cats do not like to eliminate near their food.
- 🐾 Rule out any conflicts with other cats or pets in the household. Observe if one cat, or even the dog, is blocking the other cat from accessing the box. If so, move the litter box to a different location so that the cat prevented from using the box has free access to it. If there is a conflict between the cats, behavioral measures to help repair the relationship between the cats may be necessary. If there is no aggression between the cats, try playing with each cat while in the same room, or try giving each cat treats while together. In cases where one cat is displaying aggressive behavior toward the other cat, provide separate resting and feeding areas for each cat and contact a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB), or a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (DACVB).
- 🐾 Purchase a litter box large enough for your cat to stand up in and turn around. The recommended number of boxes is one box per cat plus one extra box. If you have 2 cats, then 3 litter boxes are recommended. Try one with a lid and one without. Many cats do not prefer litter box liners. Geriatric cats may need a litter box with low sides for easier access.
- 🐾 Many cats do not prefer self-cleaning litter boxes because they can be loud, which may scare the cat. Switch to a traditional litter box in cases where the cat began eliminating outside of the self-cleaning box.
- 🐾 Scoop all litter boxes once or twice daily, and thoroughly clean the litter boxes with warm unscented soapy water weekly and refill them with fresh litter.

- 🐾 Place 1-2 inches of litter in the litter boxes. Clumping, unscented litter is typically preferred by cats however if you are unsure about the type of litter your cat prefers, set up multiple litter boxes with different types of litter. The litter box the cat uses the most will help determine the cat's preferred litter type.
- 🐾 Scatter litter boxes throughout your household, in different rooms or on different floors of multilevel homes. Place them in low traffic, quiet areas that have a view of approaching people or other animals. Escape routes should be considered in case the cat needs to exit the box quickly. Laundry rooms tend to be noisy and not optimal areas for litter boxes.
- 🐾 Clean all soiled areas with an enzymatic cleanser (available in pet stores or online). Do not use ammonia to clean soiled areas as the scent may attract cats back to the area to eliminate again.
- 🐾 Place litter boxes, food bowls, treats, or toys over areas where your cat habitually soils. Alternatively, completely block previously soiled areas by placing furniture, tin foil, upside down carpet runners, or double-sided sticky tape over these areas.
- 🐾 Consult your veterinarian regarding medication for your cat. In cases where stress or anxiety is causing the litter box problem, medication can help alleviate the stress and help to resolve the litter box problem.

NEVER

- 🐾 Scold your cat for eliminating out of the litter box.
- 🐾 Carry your cat to the litter box and force her into it.
- 🐾 Rub your cat's nose in urine or feces.
- 🐾 Confine your cat for long periods of time (days to weeks) in a small room with a litter box.

Urinating outside of the litter box in a squatting position is different from *urine marking*. When cats mark their territory, typically they are in a standing position, their tail is high and wavers, and then they back up towards a vertical surface and spray urine. For more information on urine marking, please see our article titled "Urine Marking in Cats."

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