

Why Your Cat Hates the Litterbox

At some point or another, most cat owners have to contend with a cat who partially or completely quits using its litter box. While litter box issues can be difficult to diagnose, most of them are caused by one more of the following factors: issues with the litterbox set up; medical problems; stress or anxiety; or territorial marking.

The following will help you in determining what might be causing your cat to avoid the litterbox and what you should do next to resolve the issue.

Litterbox Set Up

Is your cat new to your home, or have you recently moved or adjusted the litterbox? If so, the way you currently have the litterbox set up could be frustrating your cat. Everything from the type of litter you are using, to the location of the litterbox, to the depth of the pan, to the type of litterbox you have purchased, may be displeasing to your cat. It could be as simple a fix as moving the litterbox to a new room, adding a litterbox, or simply removing the lid of a covered box. Scoop the litter at least once a day, and completely change the litter and clean the box at least once a month. You may have to try several different set ups before you find out what makes your cat happy. Remember, if you change their litter, do so gradually over the course of a week or two to allow them time to adjust.

Medical Problems

Any litter box problems that's not quickly solved by adjusting the litter box setup merits a trip to the veterinarian to look for medical problems, such as urinary tract or anal gland infections. These conditions can make elimination painful, and the cat might associate the pain with the litter box, which leads to them avoiding it. Problems like diarrhea may also mean that the cat simply doesn't have time to get to the box. Even after the medical problem has been resolved, the cat may avoid the box or stick with their new habits. See the last section for tips on getting them back to their box.

Stress or Anxiety

If you have ruled out litter box setup and medical problems, consider whether your cat might be under stress. Cats are creatures of habit and anything that disrupts their routines can stress them. If you've just gotten a new cat, they'll certainly be anxious in their new home for a while, and you may find that the problems go away as the cat settles in.

For a cat already living in your home, stressful changes could include:

- The addition or subtraction of human or animal household members (for instance, new pets, a new baby, an older child moving out)
- Changes in work schedules for household members
- Moving to a new house, or remodeling your current one
- Stress in the household (illness, financial issues, etc.)
- Changes that upset your cat's normal routine

Sometimes it can be hard to see what's stressing your cat – the change that's bothering them may be too subtle for you to detect. In this case, try keeping a log of exactly when and where your cat eliminates, and what's going on in the environment at that time. You may be able to see a pattern and that may help you deduce what the problem is. Don't rely on your memory for this exercise – it will be much easier to figure out the pattern if you write it down.

Why does stress lead to litter box problems? It depends on the stressor, and the cat. Perhaps the stress has disrupted your cat's eating habits or given them digestive troubles. Maybe the changes have created fears that have become associated with the litter box. Some cat behaviorists theorize that by leaving its scent all over the house, the cat is trying to make things feel familiar again, or is trying to control the situation the only way it knows how – by leaving "I was here" scent markers all over.

Territorial Marking

As mentioned above, a cat may respond to stress by territorial marking, establishing scent markers for itself all over the house in an attempt to make things feel familiar or exercise control. However, sometimes territorial marking is simply the natural instinctive behavior of cats. Non-neutered males in particular have a tendency to mark, although intact females and altered cats of both sexes do sometimes exhibit this behavior.

Some signs that indicate territorial marking in cats:

- Primarily urine rather than feces Small amounts of urine rather than large ones (a "spritz" rather than a puddle), sprayed from under a lifted tail while the cat is standing (as opposed to squatting)
- Urine often (but not necessarily always) deposited on vertical surfaces
- New objects are a target
- Objects or locations that have strong scents are a target
- Marking may happen around doorways or windows where other animals are seen The best way to deal with territorial marking is to neuter your cat. However, if a non-neutered cat establishes a habit of marking, it may stick to that habit even after neutered, so it's best to get your cat neutered as early as possible.

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Why Your Cat Hates the Litterbox (cont'd)

Helping Your Cat Cope with Stress

Of course, disruptions are going to happen, so you'll have to help your cat cope. Try the following:

- Wherever possible, introduce changes gradually. The handouts "Introducing Cats," "Introducing Cats and Dogs," and "Pets and Your New Baby" contain information about how to minimize stress when bringing new animals and babies into your household. The same principles apply for introducing other changes.
- If a change is unavoidably abrupt, you may be able to help your cat cope by establishing new routines as quickly as you can, or by making a special effort to adhere to established schedules for activities like feeding time and play time.
- Let the cat adjust to the changes at their own pace. Provide a safe place for them to retreat to, and let them go to it whenever they feel overwhelmed. Never force your cat to confront the thing that makes them anxious. Let them investigate the new situation when they feel they're ready. Most cats are capable of adjusting if given time and space to do so.
- Try products available on the market for reducing stress in cats. Of particular interest is the product Feliway, which simulates feline facial pheromones and sends an "everything's all right" message to cats. It comes in a spray as well as a plug-in diffuser. You can spray it on vertical surfaces, such as door frames and corners of furniture, in the places that your cat likes to hang out. It doesn't work with all cats, but many cat owners report excellent results. Look for suppliers on the Web, or check with your local pet store or with your vet.
- There are other cat calming products – homeopathic oils and sprays, nutritional supplements, even cat-soothing music. Some cats get a mood lift by rubbing against or eating catnip. Search for "cat calming aids" on the Web, check reviews, and talk to your vet. Again, not all products work for all cats, but you may find the right combination for yours.
- As a last resort you may want to consider anti-anxiety medication to be used in conjunction with other solutions. Talk to your vet about your options.

Now What?

If you've made all the fixes recommended above and your cat is still having litter box issues, they might have simply settled into the habit of going outside the box. You may be able to get them back to better habits using management and training. Try the following:

- Thoroughly clean all spots you've seen your cat using. Cats use scent to find spots they (or another cat) have used before, and the only way to eliminate scent to where the cat can no longer detect it is to use a good enzymatic cleaner. The handout "Cleaning Pet Stains and Odors" gives detailed information on cleaning stains so your cat can't find them again.
- Prevent your cat from using undesirable elimination spots. This may mean shutting them out of a room or otherwise discouraging them from using the spot.
- If you catch your cat IN THE ACT of eliminating in the wrong place, you can interrupt them with a startling sound such as a hand clap. Use care when doing this with a cat you already know has a stress problem. Also, don't rush your cat to the litter box immediately after the interruption – that can create a negative association with the box.
- The Feliway product, mentioned as a treatment for cat stress, can also be an effective way to deter your cat from their bad habits. By spraying your cat's favorite out-of-the-box elimination spots with Feliway, you send a "this spot already taken" message to your cat. It's important to use the product according to the instructions because contact with other substances such as detergents and enzyme cleaners can reduce its effectiveness.
- If your cat is still using the box some or most of the time, reward them with a treat each time you see them using it.
- If the above steps fail, you may be able to retrain your cat to use the box by keeping it in a room with the box, restricting its access to alternate elimination spots. Make sure your cat has a comfortable sleeping spot in the room and that the litter box is sufficient distance from the food and water bowls. Be sure the litter box setup follows the guidelines given in this handout and keep the box scrupulously clean.
- Once your cat is reliably using the box in the room you can expand their freedom a few rooms at a time.
- Make sure to spend plenty of time with your cat in this room during the retraining process to avoid stress and develop a positive association with the litter box location. Choose the room carefully as you'll need to leave the box in that same location if you want the cat to keep using it, although you can add additional boxes in other locations around the house.
- Never punish your cat after the fact for eliminating in the wrong place. Your cat won't understand what they're being punished for, which can escalate stress and make the problem worse.