



Litter Box Problems

Litter box problems are the most frequently encountered issue by cat lovers. Litter box problems may occur for a number of reasons, including location of the litter box, type of litter and/or box, and environmental stressors. When addressing litter box problems, patience is essential. Cats are sensitive creatures, and it may take time and some detective work to determine the cause of the problem, and the solution.

Why do cats stop using the litter box?

There are a number of reasons why a cat may stop using their litter box. The first step is to rule out a medical reason for the behavior. Schedule a visit with your veterinarian to identify any health concerns, so that appropriate treatment may begin immediately. Once medical concerns have been addressed, examine your cat's environment. The most common reasons why cats do not use the litter box are preference for a type of litter that is not being provided, location of the litter box and cleanliness of the litter box.

Have you changed the brand of litter typically used?

If so, return to the old brand. Your cat is letting you know which type of litter they prefer.

Have you changed the location of the litter box?

If so, return it to the original location. Cats are creatures of habit and prefer to have a stable, predictable environment, with the essentials (food, water, litter box) located in expected locations. If you would eventually like to relocate a litter box, introduce a second box in the new location, while keeping the old location available. Once you notice consistent use of the new box, attempt to remove the old box. Your cat will let you know if he or she is ready.

Have you changed the type of litter box?

Some cats prefer uncovered versus covered litter boxes. Some cats will use a litter box with a litter pan liner, while some will not.

What can I do to help my cat begin to use the litter box?

There are many simple things you can do to encourage use of the litter box. The most important thing you can do is to pay attention to the cues your cat gives when you are working through this process.

Litter

There are many different types and brands of litter available. Declawed cats often prefer soft, fine-grained, scoopable litter. Cats that eliminate on soft surfaces, such as bedding or piles of clothes, may also prefer this type of litter. Cats that eliminate on slick surfaces, such as floors or counter tops, may prefer this type of litter spread in a thin layer at one end of the litter box, with the other end of the box left bare of litter. Cat Attract is a brand of litter designed to entice cats with litter box aversion to use the litter box. You may want to try multiple litter boxes, with different types of litter in each box, to determine your cat's preference.

Litter Boxes

Litter boxes come in many different varieties: covered, uncovered, self-cleaning, top entry, etc. It may take some experimentation to determine your cat's preference. You may want to try both covered and uncovered litter boxes to see which your cat frequents more often. Self-cleaning litter boxes are a good idea in theory, but the noise emitted by the self-cleaning mechanism can act as a deterrent for some cats. Most cats prefer not to have litter pan liners in their litter boxes.

Litter Box Placement

As a rule, you should always have one more litter box than there are cats, so one cat equals two litter boxes, and so on. Placement is also very important. Litter boxes should be located in low-traffic areas, where cats will not be startled or scared while using the litter box. Do not place litter boxes in areas of your home where your cat rarely goes. Cats like to have all of their necessities within their preferred perimeter, so placing a litter box in a room that your cat never enters will not be effective. Do not place litter boxes in close proximity to food and water bowls. Cats do not like to eliminate close to where they eat and drink. Do not place litter boxes near loud appliances or fixtures, such as furnaces or dish washers. Loud noises act as deterrents for cats.

Litter Box Cleaning

Cats are extraordinarily clean creatures and expect that their litter box be kept as clean as possible. Scoop litter boxes at least once per day, and change out the litter entirely every four to six days. Scoopable litters may require less frequent box changes. When changing out litter, wash the litter pan, lid (if applicable) and litter mat thoroughly. If using a cloth litter mat, be sure to launder it as often as the litter is changed. Do not use harsh smelling cleansers, as the scent can linger and act as a deterrent. Anti-bacterial dish soap, with a very small amount of bleach if preferred, is an ideal cleanser. Avoid citrus scented soaps, as cats do have an aversion to citrus scents.

Cleaning Soiled Areas

Animals are very likely to continue to soil in areas that smell like urine or feces, so it is very important to thoroughly clean all areas. A black light, available at hardware and most pet stores, will reveal areas where your cat has urinated. Clean all areas with an enzymatic cleaner – there are many varieties of enzymatic cleaners available at pet or natural food stores. Clean areas before steam cleaning, to prevent any odors from being “locked in”. General household cleaners will not completely remove odors.

Deterrents for Soiled Areas

In addition to thorough cleaning, you can also deter your cat from revisiting frequently soiled areas. Place plastic carpet runners over the area, cover the area with aluminum foil, or place citrus scented fabric or cotton balls over the area. You may also place water bowls in the area as cats do not like to eliminate where food or water is available. Another option is to place a litter box over the area. Once your cat has consistently used the litter box in this location (for approximately one month), you may slowly begin to relocate the box to a more convenient location, by moving it about one inch per day. At this rate, the habitual nature of your cat is accommodated, and continued use is encouraged.

Household Changes

Cats are very sensitive to change so it is very important to ensure that their environment is as predictable as possible, especially when dealing with litter box issues. Make sure that the physical environment is as consistent as possible. Leaving piles of laundry, bags, etc. in places that they are typical not found can encourage your cat to view these as new areas to soil. Make your home as cat friendly as possible, to alleviate any stress your cat may be experiencing and to encourage your cat to view your home as their home. Provide scratching posts, cat perches and cat beds, and any toys your cat takes an interest in. Consider leaving a radio or television on, with low volume, while you are away. Spend at least 15 minutes per day interacting with your cat, whether it be by playing, brushing or just petting. Cats are very social animals and like to know they have a place in your life.

Other Remedies

You may want to consider other remedies to assist in addressing litter box issues. A homeopathic option is to add a small amount of Rescue Remedy, a flower essence available at natural food stores, to your cat's water. Rescue Remedy works wonders to reduce stress and anxiety - in people as well! Feliway, spray and plug-in dispenser - available at most pet stores, is another natural alternative that works to reduce stress. A mild anti-depressant may also be an option to address stress and anxiety. Discuss this option with your veterinarian.

Caught in the Act

If you do catch your cat while he or she is eliminating outside of the litter box, make a noise to startle and interrupt your cat, but do not scare your cat. Bring your cat immediately to the litter box and set him or her next to it. Offer praise when your cat does use the litter box. Never punish your cat. Scolding your cat, putting your cat's face in the soiled area, or using any other type of punishment will only cause your cat to be frightened of you and fearful of eliminating in front of you. You want your cat to feel comfortable and safe with you at all times. This is a crucial component of making litter box problems a thing of the past.

Additional Resources

http://www.hsus.org/pets/pet_care/our_pets_for_life_program/cat_behavior_tip_sheets/solving_litter_box_problems.html

http://cats.about.com/cs/behavioralissues/a/outsidebox_one.htm

http://www.catsinternational.org/articles/housesoiling/prevention_of_problems.html