

Solving Litter Box Problems

Most cats have very good litter box habits. But sometimes even the most faithful of litter box users may have accidents. Sharing a house with a cat that eliminates inappropriately can be very frustrating. Understanding why the cat is not using the litter box is the key to solving the problem, along with good measures of patience and persistence.

Determining the problem

If your cat is having litter box problems, the first step is to take him to the veterinarian for a complete health examination. Avoidance of the litter box can be the first symptom of a serious health problem such as cystitis (bladder infection), which can prove fatal if not treated promptly. If the problem is medical, the veterinarian will probably prescribe antibiotics and possibly modify the cat's diet.

If the problem is not a medical one, you need to determine what form the elimination is taking. There are two decidedly different behaviors that are termed inappropriate elimination. One is called spraying. This is a form of urine-making that is an expression of a territorial, competitive, or sexually related drive. When a cat sprays, it stands straight legged, holds its tail in a vertical position and squirts urine against a vertical surface such as windows, doors or furniture. Spraying is done primarily by un-neutered cats of either sex, although any cat is capable of spraying. The other form of inappropriate elimination is called squatting. The cat squats with its tail held parallel with the floor. The urine is deposited on a horizontal surface, such as the floor, the bathtub or your bed. Each form of inappropriate elimination requires a different approach to solve it, so determining which problem your cat has is critical.

Whatever the problem is, do not use punishment as a means of dealing with it. Punishment does not correct a litter box problem. It can even serve to increase the problem, as scolding the cat is likely to make him afraid of both you and the litter box. In addition, it is important to clean the site of any accidents thoroughly. Cats have a very sensitive sense of smell, and may return to use the site again if the smell attracts them. Use soap and water, followed by a deodorizer. Avoid ammonia-based cleaners as they smell similar to urine. You can make a deodorizer using one part vinegar to one part water. Commercial deodorizers are available through pet supply stores and veterinary offices.

If your cat is spraying

If your cat is un-neutered, he will almost certainly spray. This is just natural cat behavior. Neutering is the first step to eliminate spraying. In the vast majority of cases,

neutering a cat that sprays will eliminate the behavior almost immediately. When neutered cats spray, it is almost always the result of an aggressive or competitive relationship between two or more cats. A new cat can stimulate an aggressive reaction in the resident cat. Also, indoor cats may react to the sight or scent of outdoor cats by spraying. One factor holds true in all cases- the more cats in the household, the higher the probability of spraying.

Once you have identified the cause of your cat's spraying, you can attempt to eliminate the behavior. If the cat is choosing a particular area to spray, try preventing your cat from entering the area. Another approach is to change the significance of the spraying location in that spot. When a cat sprays in many locations, preventing access or changing the significance of those locations usually does not have an effect. If you recognize events that lead to spraying behavior, try to keep the cat from experiencing those events. For example, if the sight of outdoor cats' leads to your cat's spraying, draperies could be drawn at the windows where you cat sees other cats or the door to those rooms involved could be closed. The presence of other indoor cats may also elicit spraying. The introduction of a new cat into the household may cause either the resident or new cat to spray. This behavior usually diminishes over time as the cats adjust to each other. If you find that nothing seems to dissuade your cat from spraying in the house, talk to your veterinarian about the possibility of hormonal therapy.

If your cat is squatting

Normal elimination behavior involves digging in loose materials, eliminating and then covering the urine or feces. Kittens will instinctively do this without instruction from their mother. Cats have preferences for the feel of materials they like to dig into. Most commercial cat litters are made with human concerns in mind, not feline concerns. But even if he dislikes his litter, he may continue to use it until he discovers some other material – your carpet, your bed – that gives him more tactile satisfaction. Try switching litters. Stick to natural clay or sand litters that do not have scents.

A cat that is squatting may have developed a preference for a particular surface type or a particular spot. A surface preference may form as an association between scratching on a surface and then eliminating on it. For example, in the process of scratching to cover his urine or feces, your cat may scratch the sides of his litter box or even the carpet around the cat eliminating of a similar surface. So instead of eliminating in the box and scratching the smooth sides of the box, he may move to eliminating on another smooth surface such as the bathroom floor or bathtub. Or instead of scratching the carpet around the box, he may just move the carpet itself. This behavior can be cured by a program of re-association, in which the cat is trained to associate elimination with the feel of cat litter and cat litter alone. Place a litter box at the site of elimination and after the cat begins using it, move it little by little to where you want it.

Sometimes the location of the box causes a cat to avoid it. If the box is located in a busy area, or if bothered by kids or dogs while using it, a cat may seek out a quieter spot of his own choosing. Try to choose a spot with easy access, yet that is quiet and private. Avoid rooms that can be closed off. Although not the most common cause of litter box problems, emotional disruption can cause a cat to eliminate inappropriately. The prolonged absence of the cat's guardian, a new baby in the household, or a move to a new residence can cause a cat to stop using the box. As the cat adjusts to the changes, good litter box habits most likely will resume, but retraining may be necessary.

Occasionally, a cat may associate the litter box with the smell of another cat, especially if one cat is intimidating the other. The cat will then avoid the litter box rather than draw unfriendly attention to him. If this is the case, place another litter box in a different location. You will likely need to keep multiple boxes to ensure peace and privacy for each cat. And finally, keep the box clean. No one can blame a cat for not wanting to use a dirty litter box.

If all else fails

If you try everything and your cat still won't use the litter box, you will need to start a more dramatic and intensive training program. Continue the cat to a small area, such as a large airline carrier, bathroom or laundry room. Be sure to offer a clean, roomy box filled with plain clay litter. Check on the cat frequently. After he uses the box, reward him by letting him out until you think he needs to go again. Continue this routine until good litter box habits are firmly re-established. This may take a month or more. Test him with weekly vacations from the confinement. Retraining your cat to use the litter box requires an investment of time and effort. But the hours will seem worthwhile when your cat consistently uses the box and can assume the role of a trusted member of the household.