

Litter Box Problems Can Be Prevented

“An ounce of prevention...”

1. Have your cat spayed or neutered at six months of age. Sexually mature, intact cats will frequently use urine and fecal marking to indicate their territory. Neutering will correct 90% of elimination problems.
2. There should be one litter box per cat in the household, plus one additional litter box. Extra litter boxes are necessary because some cats like to defecate in one and urinate in another. Others will not use a box that has already been soiled or used by another cat.
3. Clean the litter boxes DAILY. The single most common reason for a cat's refusal to use a litter box is because the box is dirty. Non-clumping litter should be scooped daily. The litter box should be emptied and washed every other day. Clumping litter should also be scooped daily and the litter boxes washed when soiled.
4. Choose a litter that appeals to the cat. Most cats prefer the texture of the sand-like scooping litters. Be sure to choose a brand that clumps into a firm ball, making scooping easier and cleaner (Everclean HD is excellent*). As a health precaution for younger kittens that might be prone to ingest the litter, use a non-clumping litter until the kitten is four months old.
5. NEVER use a scented litter. Perfumed, chemical scents repel cats. When you wash the litter box, use a mild dishwashing liquid. Do not use harsh chemicals that will leave an odor.
6. Do not use litter box liners – they can be irritating to some cats. In addition, covered or hooded litter boxes may be offensive to some cats. Be sure the litter box is not too small for your cat. The minimum size for a litter box is 22" x 16."
7. Place litter boxes in quiet, private places that are easily accessible to the cat. The box should be in a location where it will not be disturbed by children or ambushed by other pets. Noisy areas near washing machines, furnaces or under stairs may frighten the cat away from the box. A house with several stories should have a litter box on each floor. NEVER place litter boxes near food or water dishes.
8. While kittens have an innate predisposition to use loose material as their litter, they may also choose other locations. You should limit their territory until they learn that the litter box is the only acceptable place for elimination. Praise and rewards will speed up the learning process. Like small children, they should not be expected to travel very far to find their toilet areas.
9. When introducing a new cat into the home, confine the cat to one room with its litter box, bed, food and water until the cat has used the litter box several times and shows an interest in exploring the rest of the house.
10. Help your cat feel comfortable in his new home and territory. Play games with him, give him a massage, talk to him frequently. Give him positive and affectionate attention. A confident, secure, contented and relaxed cat does not need to relieve anxiety and stress by such extreme measures as urinating or fecal marking.

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2082 Cheyenne Court, Grafton, WI 53024 • phone: 262-375-0130 • fax: 262-375-4196 • www.bestfriendsvet.com



What To Do If Your Cat is Not Consistently Using the Litter Box

"...a pound of cure."

1. Have your cat examined by a veterinarian for a physical problem. Be sure to mention kitty's urination and defecation habits. If a cat's elimination is painful, it may associate the litter box with pain and choose to eliminate elsewhere. When the cat is healthy again, a careful reintroduction to the box will be necessary.
2. Carefully check the 10 steps for preventing litter box problems. Are you following all of them? Perhaps the solution is as easy as adding more litter boxes, cleaning more frequently or changing the brand of litter. Try to accommodate your cat's preferences for location and litter material whenever possible.
3. Never punish the cat for eliminating outside of its litter box. House-soiling typically occurs when the litter box, its contents or its location is offensive to the cat. However, this problem may also present itself when the cat is stressed by the environment. HOUSE-SOILING IS NEVER DONE TO SPITE THE OWNER.
4. If aversion to the litter box can be ruled out, consider that the problem could be anxiety-related. Has there been a change in the household? Any intrusion on the cat's territory, whether human, animal or even a new piece of furniture, can cause a cat to feel threatened, insecure and stressed. This results in his need to remind himself and the world of his territory. Territorial marking is usually accomplished by spraying urine on vertical surfaces or, less frequently, by squatting and urination or defecated on horizontal surfaces. The more cats in the household, the more likely it is that one or more of them will spray.
5. Try to relieve or eliminate the source of the cat's anxiety. For example, pull the drapes so that the cat cannot view the antics of the tom cat next door. If the environmental cause that triggers the territorial behavior cannot be identified or eliminated, consult with an experienced feline behavior counselor.
6. Whatever the cause for the inappropriate elimination, a brief confinement period may be necessary in order to clean the soiled areas, place deterrents in these spots and purchase new litter boxes or new litter. The confinement room should be a comfortable room and should contain two litter boxes, fresh food and water, a bed and toys. Remember not to place the litter boxes near the food and water. Visit the cat regularly, but do not let him out until the home environment has been cleaned and the litter box situation improved. Please note that extended periods of confinement may be detrimental to the retaining process. When the cat is let out, it is important to PRAISE APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR.
7. In order to thoroughly clean the urine-soaked areas, a black light may be used to identify the problem spots and a strong enzymatic cleaner should be used to saturate and neutralize them. The Equalizer (available through veterinary clinics) and Zap-A-Spot have proven to be highly effective. To repel the cat from previously soiled areas, cover them with a vinyl carpet runner (upside down), a solid air freshener (preferably in a citrus scent) or bowls of dry cat food.

Solving house-soiling problems is possible with patience, persistence and a systematic plan for retraining. If you would like help determining the cause or treatment for an inappropriate elimination problem, give us a call.

Handout courtesy of Betsy Lipscomb, Cats International, www.catsinternational.org.