

Resolving Inappropriate Elimination Issues with Cats

Cats tend to have surface and location preferences for where, and on what, they like to eliminate. Cats instinctively bury their waste and prefer a loose, sandy substance which is why they gravitate towards litter boxes. When cats go outside of the litter box it takes thoughtful consideration and understanding to identify what factors may have caused it to begin with.

Some common reasons why cats don’t use the litter box are: an aversion to the box, a preference for a particular surface not provided by the box, a preference for a particular location where there is no box, a medical issue or any combination of these. Also, any change to the cat’s environment can cause (short or long-term) stress and can start the cycle of inappropriate elimination.

Sometimes, the reason the problem first started may not be the same reason it’s continuing. For example, your cat may have stopped using the litter box because of a urinary tract infection, and has now developed a surface preference for carpet and a location preference for the bedroom closet. You would need to address all three of these factors in order to resolve the problem.

## Medical Problems

It’s common for cats to begin eliminating outside of their litter box when they have a medical problem. A urinary tract infection or crystals in the urine can make urination very painful. Cats often associate this pain with the litter box and begin to avoid it. Be sure to rule out medical concerns. Cats don’t always act sick, even when they are. If you take your cat to the vet because of their peeing outside of the litter box, things to notice in preparation for the vet trip include: Does the cat try to pee in the litter box? Does the cat pee right by the litter box or further away? How large is the spot of urine? Does the cat cry a lot? Are they drinking more water than usual? Can you tell if the urine is almost clear, normal color, or dark? When was the last time you know for a fact that the cat urinated?

## Cleaning Soiled Areas

Because animals are highly motivated to continue soiling an area that smells like urine or feces, it’s imperative that you thoroughly clean the soiled areas. Tips on this are given in the last section.

**Aversion To The Litter Box**

Your cat may have decided that the litter box is an unpleasant place to eliminate if:

* The box is not clean enough.
* She has experienced painful urination or defecation in the box due to a medical problem.
* She has been stressed while using the litter box (ex. startled by a noise and/or “ambushed” by another cat, a child, a dog, or by you if you were attempting to catch her for some reason or she associates the box with punishment if someone punished her for eliminating outside the box, then placed her in it).
* There is something directly troubling about the litter box such as use of scented litter, litter box liners (claws get stuck), use of deodorizers and cleansers (even vinegar and bleach can deter a cat), amount of litter etc. (And just to complicate things—some cats dislike the litter if it’s kept too clean)

## What You Can Do

* Choose a litter box that takes in to consideration the size, age and general condition of the cat (ex. An older cat may need a shallow box, an over the edge pee-er should have a large one with a high back)
* Always try removing the cover from covered boxes! Make sure food and water bowls are not in close proximity to their litter box. Cats dislike this for obvious reasons.
* Keep the litter box extremely clean. Scoop at least once a day (more if needed) and change out the litter frequently. This will vary according to how many cats are in the household, how many litter boxes you have etc. A good guideline is that if you can smell the box, then you can be sure it’s offensive to your cat as well. Experts recommend having at least one litter box per cat.
* Add a new, additional box in a different location and use a different type of litter in the new box. Because your cat has decided that her old litter box is unpleasant, you’ll want to make the new one different enough that she doesn’t simply apply the old, negative associations to the new box.
* Cats are highly sensitive to scent and prefer unscented litters. If you recently changed litter at which the behavior began, change back. If you recently relocated the litter box to a new place, change back. If experimenting with different varieties of litter, do so gradually over time and always leave a familiar litter available in another box. Mixing the current litter with a new litter can be helpful in transitioning your cat.
* Make sure the litter box is in a quiet, comfortable, private place and isn’t near an appliance that makes noise or in an area of the house that your cat doesn’t frequent.
* If ambushing by a dominant or playful cat is a problem, create more than one exit from the litter box, so that if the “ambusher” is waiting by one area, your cat always has an escape route.

## Surface Preferences

All animals develop preferences for a particular surface on which they like to eliminate. These preferences may be established early in life, but they may also change overnight for reasons that we don’t always understand. Sometimes it’s accidental. For example, if your cat scratches the bathmat hanging over the tub near it’s box, it may have developed an association between elimination and fabric.

Your cat may have a surface preference if:

* She chooses to eliminate on a particular texture, for example, soft-textured surfaces such as carpet, bedding or clothing, or slick-textured surfaces, such as tile, cement, bathtubs or sinks.
* She frequently scratches on this same texture after elimination, even if she eliminates in the litter box.
* She is or was previously an outdoor cat and prefers to eliminate on grass or soil.

**What You Can Do**

* If your cat is eliminating on soft surfaces, try using a high quality, scoopable litter, and put a soft rug under the litter box.
* If your cat is eliminating on slick, smooth surfaces, try putting just a very thin layer of litter at one end of the box, leaving the other end bare, and put the box on a hard floor. Gradually increase the amount of litter used over time once the cat begins using the box.
* If your cat has a history of being outdoors or is eliminating in your plants, add some soil, dirt or sand to the litter box.
* Make the area where she has been eliminating aversive to her by covering it with an upside down carpet runner or aluminum foil, double sided sticky tape or by placing citrus-scented cotton balls over the area (see our handout on deterrents). Be sure these areas are cleaned to remove odors, not simply masked. Odor removal is covered later.

**Location Preference**

Your cat may have a location preference if:

* He always eliminates in quiet, protected places, such as under a desk downstairs or in a closet.
* He eliminates in an area where the litter box was previously kept or where there are urine odors.

**What You Can Do**

* Put at least one litter box on every level of your house. Have at least one litter box per cat.
* Make the area where he has been eliminating aversive to him by covering it with an upside down carpet runner, aluminum foil or double sided sticky tape, or by placing deterrent scented cotton balls over the area (see our handout on deterrents).
* Consider putting a litter box in the location where your cat has been eliminating. When he has consistently used this box for a couple to a few weeks, you may *gradually* shift it to a more convenient location--a few feet per week until it is in its final desired location.
* Visually and/or physically block areas where there was past elimination (for example, place a chair there). This can change the space and the dynamic or make it difficult to access.

**In the Act**

If you catch your cat in the act of eliminating in the house, do something to interrupt him like making a noise to get her attention, but be careful not to scare him. Immediately take him to where the litter box is located and *set him on the floor--*NOT in the box. If he wanders over to the litter box, wait and praise him with an encouraging voice and a gentle pet after he eliminates in the box. If he takes off in another direction, he may want privacy, so watch from afar until he goes back to the litter box and eliminates, then praise him when she does.

NEVER punish your cat for eliminating outside of the litter box. If you find a soiled area, it’s too late to administer a correction. Do nothing but clean it up. Rubbing your cat’s nose in it, taking him to the spot and scolding him, or any other type of punishment will only make him afraid of you or afraid to eliminate in your presence. Animals don’t understand punishment after the fact, even if it’s only seconds later.

Punishment will do more harm than good and is known to worsen the behavior.

**Retraining/Confinement**

Whatever the cause for inappropriate elimination behavior, a brief confinement period may be necessary or helpful to help you modify your space and to retrain your cat. The confinement space should be comfortable and contain everything they need. Remember, there is a difference between confining and isolating. Be sure to visit your cat regularly and praise good behavior. Bathrooms can work well because they are easily cleaned, offer privacy and you visit there regularly! Do your best to ensure that whatever space you use to confine/retrain is not one that caused the initial stress or that will increase stress. Once your cat is using the litter box consistently, allow supervised freedom in the whole house for a duration of time before ending the confinement period.

**Other Types Of House Soiling Problems**

**Marking/Spraying:**  If the urine is on a vertical surface like a wall or on the side of a sofa your cat is marking/spraying territory. This is instinctive especially in unaltered cats, primarily males. Having your cat spayed or neutered, if not already, should be a priority to eliminate or reduce this behavior. Reducing stress is also critical in eliminating or minimizing this behavior. This behavior might have been prompted by the presence of another cat outside or in a neighboring apartment (especially if *it* has not been neutered or spayed). If this is the case, the cat might focus their spraying around the front or back door or a window, or near an air vent that is shared with the other cat's apartment. Marking territory, or wanting to show being the cat “in charge” can be an issue for your cat as well if a new cat has recently been added to your household. Ask your vet for advice in handling this behavioral problem. There is also useful information available by searching online.

**Fears/Phobias:**  When animals become frightened, they may lose control of their bladder and/or bowels. If your cat is afraid of loud noises, strangers or other animals, she may house soil when she is exposed to these stimuli. Ask your vet for advice in handling this behavioral problem. There is also useful information available by searching online.

**Removing Pet Stains and Odors**

Dogs and cats often prefer to urinate and defecate on soft absorbent surfaces. Unfortunately, that may include carpets and bedding. After a pet finds a surface they prefer, they are likely to continue to use the same area unless the behavior is interrupted. To keep the pet from going on these indoor surfaces you must thoroughly clean stains. What seems clean to you may not smell clean to the pet. Regular household cleaners will not remove proteins found in urine and feces. Follow these helpful tips to remove stains and odors from your house.

**Locate and clean old stains**

* Before you can fix a housetraining problem or litter box issue, you must thoroughly clean all stains to remove their odor even if they are old and dry. Even if there is just one spot in the house, your pet will smell the scent.
* Use your nose! If you smell it, your cat does. Some people use black lights to find stains which makes them fluoresce (available at pet stores).
* Purchase a high quality enzymatic solution and follow the directions on the cleaner (found at pet stores). Do not use regular household cleaners, especially ones containing vinegar or ammonia.
* Clean things that can be laundered. Add baking soda or an oxygen based cleaner to your wash with normal detergent. Air dry items if possible. If stain is still present, add an enzymatic cleaner to the wash cycle.
* For fresh stains, remove as much liquid and solid matter as possible. Do not rub liquids into the carpet, instead blot them carefully with a dry towel or rag.
* For old or stubborn stains, rent a carpet-cleaning machine or wet-dry vac. Follow cleaning with an enzymatic cleaner.

Keep in mind, cats don’t stop using their litter boxes to get “revenge” or spite you. It will take time for your animal to be retrained. It took time for him to develop this habit and it will take time to unlearn the behavior. Be patient during the housetraining process. Your anxiety will make your pet more stressed. Consult a behaviorist if the problem continues or you need additional support.

This information was compiled from The Progressive Animal Welfare Society, Denver Dumb Friends League and the Humane Society of the United States.