



The Top 8 Reasons Why Your Kitty Won't Use the Litter Box

Information adapted from original article by J. Anne Helgren © 2015

Why won't cats use the litterbox? There are several reasons that we will tell you in this article. We will also give you solutions to help you solve your litter box problems.

Litter box avoidance and inappropriate elimination (urinating outside the litter box) are the most frequent and irritating disagreements humans have with their kitties.

Inappropriate urination and defecation may mean that the litter box facilities are sub par, that there's a medical problem or, in the case of marking behavior, that your cat is trying to signal something.

Cats use elimination of urine (and sometimes feces) for communication – a kind of pee-mail, if you will. That can be a sign that something is wrong. In the latter situation, your kitty is not being mean or spiteful. She's got a problem and you'll have to figure out what it is if you want it to go away.

Punishing your cat for inappropriate elimination will *not* solve the problem. It will only teach her to fear and avoid you, and eliminate when you're not around. In fact, it can actually make the problem worse, since inappropriate elimination is often caused by stress, and punishment will only add to her stress level.

What Should You Do if Your Cat Doesn't Use the Litter Box?

When your cat eliminates outside the box, you should first schedule an appointment with your veterinarian. Feline Lower Urinary Tract Disease(FLUTD), a group of disorders and diseases affecting the urinary tract, and colon disorders, such as irritable bowel disease, can cause inappropriate elimination.

Symptoms of FLUTD include frequent voiding, straining at the end of urination, and blood in the urine. If your cat shows any of these signs, schedule an appointment immediately. Both males and females are at risk, but males are more likely to develop life-threatening blockages. If your cat strains to urinate and produces only a tiny amount of urine, rush him to the veterinarian. This is a life-threatening emergency.

Once your veterinarian rules out a physical problem, then you should start to unravel the problem by looking at what's going on in your cat's life. Watch carefully and find out when and where she is eliminating inappropriately, and what's happening in the household at the time. Recognizing the reasons for litter box avoidance and addressing the cause will help you find a

solution to the problem. With understanding, patience, and persistence, most such problems can be overcome.

Here are the top eight reasons cats won't use the litter box with some helpful solutions:

1. Dirty Litter Box

A common reason for litter box avoidance is the cat's natural cleanliness. If you think the box smells bad, just imagine how it smells to your cat, since she has 200 million odor-sensitive cells in her nose compared to your 5 million. If she is turning up her nose at the box and eliminating elsewhere, it could be that it's not clean enough and offends her sensitive olfactory apparatus. In the wild, there's a good reason for such fastidiousness. Predators locate prey by scent. This is one good reason why cats are so careful about covering their waste – to keep bigger predators from locating them. A dirty litter box can make your cat feel vulnerable.

Clean the box often. Scoop out the soiled litter and solid wastes daily or twice a day, and change the litter and scrub the box with warm, soapy water weekly if you are using regular clay litter. Don't use harsh cleaners, such as bleach, to clean the box; they may offend your cat's delicate sense of smell further and add to the problem.

Some cats are simply fussier than others, so a weekly scrubbing might not be enough. If so, you might try a clumping litter. With clumping litters, the litter needs changing less frequently, and still remains relatively odor free. By scooping out the clumps and solid wastes once or twice a day, depending upon the number of cats you have, you can make all but the most sensitive cats happy. Ultimately, you and your cat will have to reach an agreement on the cleaning frequency.

2. Placement

Location is also vital. If your cat doesn't like the litter box's location, she may not use it. For example, if you place the litter box too close to her food and water dishes, she may avoid the box since cats don't like to eat and eliminate in the same area. If the box isn't easily accessible – for example, down in the basement or up on the top floor – she may not be able to get there in time, or may think it's too much trouble. If she has to brave some stressor to get to the box, such as a noisy water heater, the washer and dryer, or a dominant cat's territory, she may look for a safer place to eliminate. Cats like quiet, safe, private places to do what they have to do. Follow your cat and observe what's going on.

If location is the problem, move the litter box to an area that allows the cat privacy but is accessible and convenient for cleaning. Some people prefer keeping the box in the bathroom, but in a multi-cat household that can get crowded. Consider using a closet in a spare bedroom or a well-ventilated porch with easy access. Some owners locate litter boxes in a rarely frequented second bathroom or even in the bathtub. Try several locations until you find one she will use consistently.

3. Litter Changes

If a change in litter box behavior occurs after you've switched the type or brand of litter, try changing back. Your cat may not like the new litter. Cats are individuals and what appeals to one cat may not appeal to another. Some are highly perfumed to mask odors from human noses, but perfumes are offensive to some cats; other litters just don't have the right feel. Cats evolved from desert animals and a litter with the texture of sand is usually well accepted.

Experiment with several types to see what he likes best. Buy a small box or bag of each – test clumping and non-clumping clay (try the unscented versions), recycled paper, wood byproducts, plant-based material – the varieties are practically endless. Fill several boxes with different kinds, and see which one your cat prefers. With all these choices you are bound to find one that suits. Choosing a litter should be a team effort. If you find yourself needing to switch litters, try changing the litter gradually. Slowly add more of the new litter into the old to increase the chances of your cat accepting the switch.

If you are bringing a formerly outdoor cat indoors, and he is not using the litter box, it could be that the litter is not what he's used to. Try filling the box with clean dirt or sand – whatever he's been using in the yard. After he's using the box consistently, very gradually, over the next two or three weeks, mix the dirt with increasing amounts of the litter you want him to use.

4. Litter Box Issues

The size, shape, and depth of the litter box can also affect your cat's behavior]]. She may reject the box if, for some reason, she doesn't like it. Hooded litter boxes are popular with some cats, but most don't like the confining nature of them and feel trapped when using such a box – a particular problem in multicat households with dominance disputes. Large or overweight cats may find the opening to a covered box too small, or may not have enough room to maneuver inside such a box, and longhaired cats may have trouble keeping their fur clean.

Older cats, or cats with health problems, such as arthritis, may have trouble stepping into boxes with high sides, or into boxes with smaller openings. If cats have any health problem that makes movement difficult, provide a sturdy ramp in front of the box, and a step down inside, if needed.

Some cats dislike litter box liners. Remove the liner if you notice your cat pulling it up or leaving claw marks in the plastic.

Providing several boxes of different sizes and types may help resolve the litter box problem.

5. Environmental Changes

Cats are creatures of habit and they don't like changes in their environment. If your cat stops using the litter box after a change has taken place in the household, it could be that the change

is causing her to become anxious. Anxiety is one of the more common feline emotional problems, and may contribute to a number of behavior problems, including house soiling. Have you just brought home a new child, spouse, family member, or pet? Have you moved or remodeled the house? Have you recently changed your routine – gone back to work, say, after being at home all day? Even healthy cats can become stressed and anxious by changes that might seem minor to you. Look at the situation from the cat's viewpoint and see what might be going on.

During household changes, reassure your cat, give him extra attention and treats, and keep the litter box squeaky clean. This will help him regain his feeling of safety and routine, and help him adjust more quickly.

6. Territorial Disputes

If you have more than one cat, disputes can arise over litter box usage. Cats are territorial by nature. Their societies are sometimes structured in a hierarchical manner, governed by strict rules of conduct. In multicat households, the dominant cat will sometimes leave her feces uncovered as a form of scent marking, to announce her presence and status. Uncovered feces mean that the territory is taken. If the other cats feel they're encroaching on a dominant cat's territory, they'll be reluctant to use that box.

Also, some cats don't like sharing their litter box with other cats. The solution is to provide a litter box and a private location for each cat. As a rule, you should have one litter box for every cat in the household. Also, consider keeping an extra box in another location to circumvent disputes or clashes. If a cat doesn't want to approach the main box area while another cat is there, she can detour to the other box to do her business. This prevents the cat from choosing a less acceptable location if the need is urgent.

7. Overcrowding

Having a companion for kitty is a good way to keep him from becoming lonely when you're off earning the cat food. However, overcrowding – having too many cats for the space you have available – can create considerable stress. Many territorial-type behavior problems arise from overcrowding, including house soiling. For cats to feel secure, they must have an area to call their own, to which they can retreat when threatened. This is particularly true for indoor-only multicat households. Make sure you can provide facilities for each of your cats. You can also expand the territorial range by adding cat trees, outside enclosures [Selecting a Cat Enclosure](#), cat condos, kitty hideouts, window perches, cat shelves, screened patios, and so on. You don't have to spend a fortune – cut holes in several cardboard boxes, turn them upside down, and place them strategically. Make sure each cat is given enough love and attention, too.

8. Spraying

This marking behavior is not connected to other litter box problems, because the reason for the behavior is completely different. Unaltered male and female cats spray urine to mark their territory. While more common in males, both genders can spray. Spraying has sexual and dominance-type connotations; the behavior being most prevalent in intact cats with a full complement of sex hormones. This is why spaying and neutering usually ends the behavior.

It's easy to tell the difference between spraying and urinating. During spraying, the cat backs up to a vertical surface, raises his tail (which often quivers), treads, and sprays urine onto the vertical surface. This is as opposed to squatting to urinate. Spaying and neutering often eliminates spraying and is the first step to take toward resolution of the problem.

However, spraying can also be a sign that a neutered male or spayed female cat has some issues related to anxiety or stress (e.g. a territorial dispute or a disturbance in their routine). Battles for dominance or territory may cause spraying in a multicat household, regardless of the cats' neuter status, and you'll need to resolve the dispute before the behavior will cease. A project such as this can be challenging. Spraying may also occur if a reclusive cat sees other cats outside in the yard, an area he likely considers an extension of his territory. One little wrinkle in the diagnosis of stress-related urine marking is that it does not always occur in the form of spraying. Sometimes urine marking may be performed from the squatting posture. The key to diagnosing this curve ball delivery is to pay attention to the sites on which urine is deposited. Litter box problems result in deposition of urine in relatively uninteresting "other" locations, usually on rugs or carpets in out-of-the way locations that are convenient for the cat. Horizontal urine marking, however, might be found on a person's possessions, on new things brought into the house, on a particular bedspread, on the stovetop, on a heating register, etc. When the location of urine deposition becomes as interesting (or perplexing) as this, consider anxiety-related urine marking, even if the cat "performs" in the squatting posture.

Urine-marked areas must be well cleaned with a non ammonia-based cleaner and then the area should be blocked off so that the cat no longer has access to it for a while, or the significance of the area can be transformed by moving the food dishes there. Products for cleaning pet stains that contain enzymes or bacteria work by eliminating odor-causing chemicals. Such products are usually effective. It's important to remove all traces of the urine (and/or feces) or the scent will attract kitty back to the spot. But you need to address the problem's underlying cause to end the cycle of inappropriate elimination; otherwise, your cat will just move to another area to spray. Ask your veterinarian for advice if you're stumped for a solution. Certain medications combined with behavior modification techniques can help resolve the problem.