

How to Reduce Inappropriate Elimination by Litter Box Hygiene

BACKGROUND

Inappropriate elimination/toileting problems refers to urination or defecation by a cat in a location that is unacceptable to humans, namely somewhere in the home and outside the litter box. Inappropriate elimination can be due to many different factors, and should not be confused with marking behavior, the most common of which is spraying. When toileting problems in cats are not medically related, they are often triggered by issues related to the litter box. If you have ever been reluctant to use a “porta-potty” at a crowded event, then you can probably relate to how the cat might feel.

It’s important to remember that ‘not using the litter box’ is a nonspecific description. Medical disorders of the urinary or digestive system can cause inappropriate elimination. Cats who are ill may not reach the box; for example, cats with bladder inflammation may not be able to “hold it” to go to the box, or cats with arthritis may not be able to posture to defecate inside the box. So, it is wise to consider a veterinary checkup when “accidents” are first noticed. If no evidence of a medical problem is identified, your veterinarian can help you consider behavioral reasons to the abnormal elimination behavior. It is easier to intervene early than after bad habits have been established.

There are several reasons a cat might choose to avoid a litter box. Chief among these are dirty litter boxes, not having a litter box nearby in an easily accessible location, having to share a litter box with other cats, placement of the box in an area that is scary or uncomfortable to the cat (either physically, or due to the presence of an uncomfortable social situation), or a truly pathological aversion to some aspect of the litter box (enclosed/open, size, litter type, etc.). Of these, the most common issue relates to litter hygiene.

GOOD LITTER BOX HYGIENE, AND OTHER BOX ISSUES

Good litter box hygiene is essential for all cats. Humans dislike dirty toilets and so do cats. Furthermore, cats have a greater ability to smell odor than do humans, and they have fur to which odor clings. How do you know whether your cat wants a ‘cleaner’ litter box environment? If your cat jumps into the box to use it immediately after it has been cleaned, chances are the cat is fastidious and his or her litter box needs may not be being met.

Besides hygiene, there are other litter box–related issues to consider as a cause for inappropriate elimination. ALL indoor cats need clean litter boxes in a place they can reach easily. But otherwise, each cat has its own set of preferences. If your cat consistently uses the litter box with no problems, feel free to keep on doing what you are doing now. But if your cat is going outside the box, the issue does not seem to be marking behavior, and it is not a medical issue, then consider these factors associated with improved litter box use:

- A litter box of the appropriate size; cats prefer large boxes (1.5 times the length of the cat including the tail).
- Multiple boxes; the general rule is 1 box more than you have cats.
- Ideally, keep a box on each floor of a multilevel home.
- Scoop litter at least daily, and better yet multiple times a day.
- Empty the box – even if the litter is scoopable – at least twice a week or more often if multiple cats use the box.
- Avoid box liners as most cats do not like them.
- Avoid deodorants or other scents (e.g., lemon) in litters, liners, or boxes. Most cats do not like deodorants and extraneous

scents. These are added to please human noses, but with the consequence of allowing the person to decide the box smells OK (to the person!) and doesn’t need to be cleaned as often as it really does.

- Try different textures or types of litter—and there are many to choose from! Some cats prefer one over another by a lot. If you try the change, it is best to use the new litter type in one box while keeping the old litter available too, just in case the cat really dislikes the new.
- Keep litter at a depth the cat likes. You may have to find out what depth your cat prefers by offering him or her choices. How will you know? Studies have shown cats will dig in a litter environment that they like.
- Use undamaged, clean boxes. Wash boxes weekly in hot water and soap. Rinse multiple times and then dry before returning to use. Replace when scratched because scratches hold odor.
- Avoid hoods. Humans like hoods, but hoods trap odor. Cutting away the top part and leaving 3 sides can stop spillage and keep in litter that would have been scratched out, but allow air to circulate. Of course, some cats don’t mind hoods, and if so, that’s fine too.
- Put boxes in locations the cat likes. Cats like locations that are easy to get to. They like boxes placed where they don’t feel “trapped” and they can leave the box in many directions (they don’t like boxes in the corner or in an enclosure). They dislike having their trip to the box interrupted or blocked by a dog, a child, or another not-so-friendly cat. They want a box that is easy to climb in and out of, especially if the cat has arthritis or is small.
- Anywhere the cat has eliminated outside the box requires intense cleaning. First, clean with soap and water. Soak with club soda multiple times, blotting up the liquid until you can detect no trace of the odor or urine, feces or soap. Then, use a good odor eliminator (such as Anti-icky poo/AIP or another type made for the purpose). If possible, replace carpet and seal subfloors.

WHAT IS IF IT NOT MEDICAL AND NOT HYGIENE?

Don’t punish your cat for going outside the litter box. It is always counterproductive and damages your relationship with the cat. They cannot understand what you are trying to convey, even if you take them back to the “scene of the crime.” On the other hand, if you notice your cat leaving the litter box after using it correctly, feel free to offer praise and reward (this might be cuddling, or play, or a small food treat).

Consider the pattern of use. Cats—especially those who are anxious or worry—develop preferences and aversions that may not be rational to a human but make sense to a cat. If the cat has been scared in one circumstance, he or she may associate that with a litter box. Is there one box that is avoided while others are still used? Is there a location where the cat keeps returning, and could you put a box nearby?

Consider what surface they do like to use. Do they find cloth, like a towel on the floor or a basket of clothes? Is there a specific flooring that is the target of use? Sometimes, you can try to replicate the preferred substrate inside a box. For example, cats that use cloth might be willing to use an old towel placed inside the box (and which you wash often). You may be able to slowly shift that box back to a typical cat litter over a period of time.

Consider if the behavior is associated with a change in relationship between cats in the house, a new cat, a new dog, or a new human.

Has the cat's favorite person been away from home, or is there some other possible trigger event for the problems? If you think this is the case, work with your veterinarian and/or a specialist in veterinary behavioral medicine to ensure that you understand the social dynamics and contributors to anxiety in the household.

As with most behavioral conditions, treatment will involve changing the behavior, changing the environment, and treating any anxiety experienced by the cat. If the cat is very anxious and unhappy, as part of a complete treatment program, antianxiety medication may help, and should be part of the conversation with your veterinarian.

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