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Cat Box Questions, Concerns and Issues

Cats **will** consistently use a litter box, if it is kept scrupulously clean, and if the litter is not scented or unpleasant to the cats' feet. Carefully maintaining your cat's litter box will almost guarantee you that you will not be faced with litter box avoidance problems.

If your cat suddenly starts urinating outside the box despite your careful maintenance, you should immediately suspect a urinary tract problem which is a veterinary emergency.

Believe it or not, kittens are not born knowing about litter box protocol. Teaching proper toilet manners prevents lots of headaches (and cleaning bills).

Felines are great imitators and simply “copy-cat” their mother’s behavior when they watch and follow her to the litter box. Most kittens will already know what a litter box is for and how to use it by the time you adopt them. But if you hand-raise an orphan, or adopt a kitten younger than 8 to 10 weeks as often happens in shelter and rescue situations, you’ll need to do the job of the mother cat. Transitioning outdoor cats to an indoor lifestyle also may mean re-training bathroom etiquette from “going” among the flowers to aiming for the litter box. Here are the basics.

Privacy Matters

Felines are naturally clean creatures and dislike eliminating where they sleep or eat. They also appreciate privacy when (ahem) doing their duty. Build allegiance to the litter box by positioning it correctly, in a low-traffic area away from the cat’s bed and food bowls.

Extra Opportunities

Little kittens have tiny bladders and may not have the physical capacity to “hold it” long enough to run clear across the house or down the stairs. Provide a box on each end of the house, or one per floor.

Big Box, Small Cat

A regular size commercial box may work well for older kittens. But it could be too large for tiny kitties to climb in and out. A disposable cookie sheet or the lid to a cardboard shoebox works until he’s bigger. Once he's older, simply place the familiar shoebox lid inside the "big boy" litter box to help him transition.

Kitty Litter Preferences

A variety of cat box fillers is available, from plain clay to pine pellets and recycled wheat or corn crumbles. The ideal material absorbs moisture, contains waste and odor, and most important of all, suits the cat. A scented product that smells nice to you might actually repel the kitten so choose something neutral.

Fine textures such as the “clumping” clay litters seem to be the feline favorite, especially for those tiny kitten paws. Some of the wheat-type products do a decent job of clumping and are digestible should a tiny kitten decide to taste the litter—most kittens won’t bother. Fill the box an inch or so deep with the filler.

If you’re transitioning an outdoor kitten to an indoor box, do a bit of research and follow him to find out his preferred substrate. Dusting a bit of plain garden dirt or a layer of grass or leaves over top of the commercial litter may help give him the idea of what you have in mind.

Teaching to Copy-Cat

Kittens new to your home won’t know where the box is, even if they do know what it’s for. Place the kitten on top of the clean litter, and scratch around with your fingers to prompt imitation. Even if the baby doesn’t need to “go,” a pristine box often tempts them to dig a bit, which may lead to the first deposit.

When he’s creative in the box, reward your cat with verbal praise, a toy, or even a tasty treat reserved only for training. Don’t pick your new kitty up out of the box. Let him make his own way out of the box and the room, so he’ll better remember how to get back there the next time nature calls.

Scented Reminders

For tiny kittens, leave one recent deposit in the box after he's been productive. The scent draws the baby back to the proper location sort of like Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs, and reminds him what to do once there. But remember to keep the box clean or the cat will avoid the dirty toilet and find a better spot—such as under your bed.

Good Timing

Until you're sure the kitty consistently uses the box, make a point of scheduling potty times. Kittens need to eliminate more frequently than adults. Take the baby for a pit stop after each nap, meal, and play period.

Teaching basic bathroom allegiance from the beginning ensures your kitten gets off on the right paw. It also saves your carpet, and your sanity.

Cat lovers frequently ask for steps to help stop aggressive behavior in cats—but there are many kinds of aggression and a one-size-fits-all program won't work. Of the several kinds of cat aggression, none confuses, frustrates and frightens us as much as *petting aggression*, also called *status-related aggression*. The cat begs for attention, loves the petting, but then bites you after only a few strokes. These cats use the “leave me alone” bite to stop interactions such as petting, being lifted or approached, or moved from a favorite perch.

Litter box issues

We receive many questions about solving common litter box problems. Young kittens won't automatically know where to “go” and you'll need to teach them. Adult cats understand the basics, but can get their tails in a twist over a variety of issues. Health challenges prompt cats to find alternatives to the legal toilet, and even after veterinary diagnosis and treatment, owners need to address the behavioral aspect to solve litter box problems.

Location, Location, Location!

Your cat wants privacy, so place the toilet in a low traffic area with the least amount of disturbance. Think about the location from a cat's-eye-view, as well. Does the dog have access to this area, too? Will the clothes dryer *buzz!* just as your fearful kitty assumes the position? Unwelcome pets and obnoxious noises can send your cat to more private potty places. Cats also won't want to eliminate near where they eat or sleep (would you?).

Size Matters

Kittens and small cats won't care, but those who grow into big-boned felines will need supersized toilets. Cats prefer litter boxes at least 1-1/2 times longer than their bodies. And most commercial boxes prove sadly inadequate. Bigger cats like Maine Coons may “hang over” the edge. Other times, they may hit the mark but don't want to stand on top of their deposit to cover it up. You'll see these frustrated cats scratch-scratch-scratch forever on the *outside* of the box. Translucent sweater-storage boxes for these kitties can be helpful. The clear plastic not only contains big cats, it also allows the cat to see if the toilet's already occupied to cut down on surprises in the middle of (ahem) being creative.

The 1+1 Rule

Most cat lovers have more than one kitty. The 1+1 rule simply means you should have one litter box for each cat, plus one. While small kittens often share the facilities, adult cats can argue over this very important territory. One cat in the household may actually own the toilet and prevent the others from using it. Be sure that the multiple boxes are in different rooms or on separate floors so the facilities can't be guarded by one determined cat. Even singleton cats may require more than one box because some prefer one toilet for liquids and another for solid waste.

Empty the Litter Box

Scoop daily, and dump/scrub regularly. Cats appreciate a clean toilet and will look for other places to empty themselves if the full litter box offends them. Put yourself in their paws. Do you enjoy using a dirty or smelly “port-a-potty” at the fairgrounds? A cat's sense of smell is many times more acute than your own. Even a mild odor can be off-putting to your pet.

Fill the Litter Box

It really doesn't matter what type of litter humans like, or if it's on sale and you have a coupon. Cats don't even care if it's environmentally unfriendly or politically incorrect. To maintain litter box allegiance listen to what your cat likes; once you find that brand, don't switch. Cats love the status quo, and any change of litter box substrate could prompt them to snub the box.

A variety of cat box fillers is available, from plain clay to pine pellets and recycled wheat, paper, or corn crumbles. The ideal material absorbs moisture, contains waste and odor, and suits the cat. If you have a particular product preference, you can indoctrinate from kittenhood. But adult cats have their own ideas, and you won't win the battle. In comparison tests, cats overwhelmingly preferred fine-grained clumping litter products. Some cats, though, decide they want something different. Try a top dressing of leaves or garden dirt over the regular litter to transition outdoor cats to an indoor toilet. Is the cat "going" on linoleum, wood, paper, carpet or cloth? Try less litter or even an empty box for the kitty that prefers a smooth surface. Or line with paper, add a carpet remnant, perhaps an old hand towel to see if that floats his boat. Pay attention to the surface the cat likes, and duplicate that in the box to help re-establish the idea of using the box.

Helping Health

Health issues such as diabetes and kidney disease increase the amount of urine produced, and cats may not get to the box in time. Consider adding more boxes so one's always within reach.

Arthritic cats could have difficulty with stairs, or trouble climbing into high-sided boxes. Ensure there's a toilet the old cat can easily access. Cut down the sides of the box, or offer a "step up" for ease getting in and out.

Cats suffering from separation anxiety may stop using the box. Very old cats sometimes forget training if they develop kitty senility.

Cats May Blame the Box

Kitties that have a bad experience while in the box can blame the location or the box itself for the discomfort and avoid using it thereafter. Common causes include painful urination from lower urinary tract disorders. Constipation or diarrhea that's unpleasant might make the cat snub the box. In these cases, in addition to having us diagnose and treat the cat, get a brand new box and place it in another location. That's often all it takes to reestablish litter box loyalty.

To solve the most common litter box problems, owners must think outside the box (sorry, I couldn't resist!). Some hit-or-miss problems can be stubborn to fix, but more often it takes a simple adjustment in the location, size or number of the facilities, or the cat litter itself for the cat to return to potty allegiance.