

Litterbox Fact Sheet

We often get calls from frustrated owners whose cats are urinating or defecating outside the litterbox. This can be a very serious problem which should be addressed immediately, but there are many simple things that can be done to prevent litterbox problems before they start.

What to do if your cat starts urinating or defecating outside the litterbox

First of all, it is VERY IMPORTANT to get your cat in for an appointment with the doctor. There is a better than 95% chance that your cat is trying to tell you that he or she is in pain or there is some other medical problem, and prompt medical attention is the FIRST step in solving a litterbox problem. Potential problems include urinary tract infections, urinary crystals or bladder stones, or external infections such as urethritis or vaginitis. Some cats will communicate by means of inappropriate elimination to alert you to pain elsewhere such as an abscessed tooth or joint problems such as arthritis. It is important to understand that it is unnatural for a cat to urinate or defecate in its normal location if they are ill. Environmental stressors such as moving, the birth of a child or the addition of another pet may also cause inappropriate elimination or exacerbate existing medical problems.

Additional medical problems that may be associated with inappropriate elimination:

Kidney Failure	Constipation
Diabetes Mellitus	Impacted Anal Glands
Hyperthyroidism	Intestinal Parasites
Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)	Skin or Flea Allergies
Anxiety Disorders	Cancer

Once the doctor has ruled out any medical issues, we can follow up with behavioral suggestions as well. Our clinic offers behavioral counseling and a variety of educational handouts that may make your cat more content in its environment. Our behavior consultant and other staff members can also offer guidance for the usage of behavioral modification medications and Feliway products. We can also provide suggestions for environmental enrichment, the importance and placement of cat condos and help you understand the "normal" social interaction of cats.

Do NOT confine your cat to just one room. People often think they can solve the problem either indefinitely or permanently and "re-train" the cat to use the box. This method is ineffective as cats are not litter trained, they use a litterbox instinctually. Cats have a need to patrol the whole house, and confining them to one room can escalate their frustration and increase their stress level. And once they get "released" from their confinement, it's not uncommon for them to re-establish their territory by eliminating outside the box again.

How to stop litterbox problems BEFORE and AFTER they start

Based on our experience and research, we recommend the following advice on the best possible set-up and maintenance of litterboxes for you and your cats. Cats require a safe and calm environment; this is especially important to keep in mind when deciding on placement of litterboxes.

The Litterbox: How Many And What Kind

Many cats like to defecate in one box and urinate in another, so as a rule you should have two litterboxes per cat; if you are using our recommended "box" you can have one box per cat. The boxes we recommend are as large or larger than two regular litterboxes. It is also advisable to have one extra litterbox in addition to the recommended number; for example if you have 3 cats you should have 7 regular litterboxes or 4 of our recommended litterboxes. When cats use the litterbox, they are actually marking their territory, so two litterboxes per cat, especially in a multi-cat household, will provide a sufficient number of places for each cat to establish its "territory". Also, since cleanliness is of utmost importance to cats and people alike, a large number of boxes will not only be more pleasant for the cats but also each box will be easier for you to scoop.

When it comes to the size of the litterboxes, the larger the better. All litterboxes that you see in pet supply stores are much too small for even the average size cat, much less a large cat. The cat should have enough room to move around in the box and not have to step on areas that are already soiled. Consider using a large storage tub (e.g. Rubbermaid) with an entrance that you have cut out on one side so the cats can get into it. (Dremmel tools work great for cutting out the hole.) These tubs should be clear, particularly in multi-cat households, so that cats can see through them, because they are most vulnerable when in the litterbox. The high walls of this type of litterbox help to keep the litter in. For those cats who partially squat while they eliminate (because they have arthritis or other reasons), the high walls also help catch urine that would otherwise go over the side of an average litterbox. For examples of this type of litterbox see the photograph below or visit our adoption rooms.



Do NOT use a hooded litterbox! The hood traps odor inside and, even if scooped every day, will quickly become offensive to your cat. It also creates a confined area that makes it easier for a cat to be ambushed by others. If you are currently using a hooded litterbox because you have a dog that likes to sample the contents of the box, use a baby-gate in the doorway of each room where there are litterboxes. If you raise the gate a little off the floor, the cats can still crawl under but there won't be enough room for most dogs to fit through or jump over.

As discussed earlier, the large tubs are ideal for the majority of your litterboxes. However, consider providing an additional, shallower container at each litterbox station as an alternative. There is a 30" x 30" 2" deep drip pan for washing machines sold at Home Depot that is perfect for this. The key to successful litterbox set-up is giving your cats options. As noted above, you should not provide hooded litterboxes exclusively; however, if you've got a multi-cat household, one cat may be a "shy eliminator" and might desire the privacy a hooded box provides. The same goes for the electronic self-cleaning litterboxes. Although there is a sensor in these machines that prevents them from running if a cat is in the box, they are still a little loud and can be scary to many cats. If you have one and the cats are using it, fine. Just make sure it's not the only type of litterbox to choose from.

Do not use litterbox liners. Cats generally don't like the feel or the noise of these bags, and they really create more of a mess than not using them, as cats' nails get snagged and tear the bags.

Not only should the litterbox itself be kept clean, but the surface on which it is sitting should also be easily cleaned on a daily basis. Place the litterboxes on a plastic runner, a vinyl tablecloth, or a short-knap bath mat. These can be cleaned easily by either shaking outside or putting in the washing machine. Another great idea is to place a tracking mat in front of the litterbox. There are several types available; the one we recommend is called the Litter Welcome Mat and is available from us for \$16.44. Any litter that is on your cat's toes falls into this unique mat to be trapped inside, and it provides for easy cleaning every day. Because tracked litter does not pile up on the carpet outside the litterbox, cats won't be as likely to urinate on the floor right outside the box.

Finally, litterboxes should be replaced about every two years or more frequently if needed.

Where To Place The Litterboxes

Placement of the litterboxes is an extremely important, but often overlooked, aspect of living with cats. A stress-free litterbox experience is the goal in deciding where to put the boxes.

If your house or apartment has more than one story (including basements if freely accessible to the cats), there should be litterboxes available on each level of the home. If using two litterboxes per cat (as recommended above) always place them side-by-side in pairs; often you'll find that cats like to urinate in one box and defecate in another. Do NOT place your cats' food and water in the same area as the litterboxes; cats, being very clean animals, don't like to eat in the same place they eliminate. Also, make sure to place food bowls separately from water bowls because in the wild, cats drink in one area and hunt and eat in another.

In households with two or more cats, be sure not to place the boxes in "dead end" areas. This means that boxes should NOT be placed in laundry rooms, in linen closets, or any other small areas with only one way in and one way out. If a cat feels threatened by any other cat in the house, he or she may view such placement of a litterbox as a trap and will not use it. Instead, make sure there is a "safety route" both toward and away from each litterbox, by either placing the boxes in large, open rooms that have two exits or next to cat condos, where cats can jump up to get away from an aggressor. In general, make sure the litterbox is in a comfortable and convenient environment. Avoid the cat having to go through cat doors and avoid loud areas like laundry rooms as they can frighten a cat. Indoor cats do not have the benefit of moonlight to aid their night vision, so a nightlight is recommended to illuminate all food and litterbox areas in the house. This is especially helpful when you have cats exhibiting aggression or stalking behavior towards others in the house.

To re-iterate, placement of litterboxes is very important. If you have further questions or would like an evaluation of your litterbox placement, please contact our clinic.

Type Of Litter

In general, cats prefer clumping scoopable litter instead of clay litter. There are different textures of scoopable litter, and you may have to experiment to find a texture or brand that you and your cat like. (However, once you find a litter your cats like, avoid changing brands as this can be disruptive to your cats.) The litter that we recommend is Dr. Elsey's Cat Attract litter. It is a clumping, scoopable litter that tracks less than other clumping litters. Cats prefer the size and texture as well as the natural herbal blend (the scent mimics the aroma of soil and plant materials). You can find it at pet supply stores such as PetSmart. We also sell the Cat Attract Litter Additive, which can be added to any brand of unscented litter. We also recommend Precious Cat Classic Unscented or Ultra Unscented, which are made by the same company as Cat Attract. One more alternative for geriatric or declawed cats is Exquisicat Advanced Scoop, which is a clumping paper litter preferred by some cats for its soft airy texture. Whatever brand you choose, do NOT use a scented litter. Cats have a sense of smell that is 100 times stronger than humans, so a scent that we may think of as pleasant may act as a deterrent to cats. Cedar litter is particularly offensive. Additionally, scented litters can be irritating on cats' paws. Also, don't put any additives in the litterbox such as baking soda, Lysol, etc. Again, these can be very irritating and offensive to cats. If you notice your cat not spending much time in the litterbox, or not bothering to cover their urine or feces, chances are they do not like the type of litter you are offering.



The new crystal or silica gel litters are another type of litter that some cats prefer. These come in the form of plastic beads, either round or irregular in shape. They absorb the urine completely, as well as the smell. Cats who don't like the feel of the regular litter may favor this option. You still need to scoop this type of litter. Cats will generally only urinate in boxes using these crystals, so make sure you also provide boxes that contain scoopable litter. A study done by Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine, published in the March 2001 issue of their Catnip magazine, rated all the available brands of crystal litter. The highest rated brand was Litter Pearls Track-Less litter. We have found this brand hard to find in stores in this area, so we now carry it here at the clinic for purchase.

Giving cats options is important in type of litter as well as type of box. Eliminating in a "natural" environment, cats have a wide variety of surfaces to choose from such as dirt, pine straw or grass. You can offer a "litterbox cafeteria"; several boxes each with different substrates placed closely together and see which one receives the most usage over the course of a week. Again, the scoopable litter should be your primary choice, but try adding a box or two of the crystal litter. Another option is simply using a puppy training pad inside a regular litterbox as most cats prefer the softest texture available. These pads are available in any pet-supply store and are treated to entice a puppy to use them for housetraining. Many cats also prefer them for urinating as well as defecating, and they are easy to clean up each day; simply throw the soiled pad away, wipe the bottom of the box clean and replace with a fresh pad. Puppy training pads are great for cats that urinate excessively, like patients with diabetes or kidney disease, as they absorb urine quickly and there's no litter clumped to their paws.



And believe it or not, sometimes giving your cats the option of an empty litter box works as well. They may not like the feel of anything at all under their feet (except the smooth feel of the plastic box). Again, it's important to keep that box clean on a daily basis.

Scooping And Cleaning

Ideally, litterboxes should be scooped twice a day. Again, the focus is on keeping them as clean as possible. Cats don't like to step in a litterbox that is rarely scooped, because there is nowhere they can step that isn't soiled.



It is important, after scooping each day, to add a fresh layer of clean litter to each box. This prevents the level of litter from being too low and also keeps the box as fresh and clean as possible.

If using the clumping scoopable litter, dump and clean your litterboxes every 1-2 months. Use soap and water, but be sure to rinse thoroughly enough to get all traces of the soap out of the box. If you choose to use the clay litter instead of the clumping scoopable litter, dump it and replace the litter DAILY. Don't scoop out the solid pieces and then mix the urine around; it may look better to you, but all you've done is spread the urine throughout the box making the entire box soiled and offensive for your cat to step in.

The Cleaning Process And Management Of Soiled Areas

There are a number of products on the market that claim to be the best odor eliminators, but the enzyme cleaners tend to work the best. The product that we carry and recommend most frequently is Urine Off. We also carry Veterinary Strength Outright Stain and Odor Remover. If the instructions are followed carefully we have found these products to be quite effective.

Ideas for making soiled areas less attractive:

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|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aluminum Foil | Scat Mats |
| Potpourri On The Site | Sound Sensors |
| Catnip On The Site | Double Sided Sticky Tape |
| Upside Down Contact Paper | Vinyl Carpet Runner (Nub Side Up) |
| Place Food/Water At Site
(After Cleaning) | Provide Alternative Way To Mark
(Scratching Post Or Pad) |



Feliway is a synthetic product that mimics feline facial pheromones and makes a cat feel at ease in their environment. In conjunction with environmental modification, Feliway aids with scratching, intercat aggression and inappropriate elimination. It is available in a spray form as well as an electric diffuser. If using the spray form of this product it must be applied daily

as it dissipates over a 24 hour period just as natural marking would. It is important to note that Feliway can easily be overpowered by harsh cleansers lessening its effectiveness. Mild detergents work best. If you have further questions about this product or its use, please contact our clinic.

More Help For Litterbox Problems

Many cats have a high tolerance level for their owners' poor litterbox habits and you may not have experienced any trouble with inappropriate elimination. However, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure and if you follow the simple steps above, litterboxes should be a pleasant experience for you and your cats.

However, should your cat stop using the box remember that you are not alone, as many as 10% of cats will have an inappropriate elimination problem in their lifetime. If you are having an elimination problem with your feline friend, please make an appointment with the doctor to detect and treat any medical problems.

